

Editor's Foreward:

We're finally on the last volume, *Always Stand by Me*, it's a two parter (like *Ending Day by Day*). It's exciting for me because I actually got permission to edit these instead of no response whatsoever. These were translated by 顏掌 Translations, and were practically perfect already. For the most part all I did was change the formatting and add the pictures. The biggest change I made to the text was how the spoken parts were formatted. I prefer quotation marks and they were originally in – dashes like this –. I also fixed the occasional spelling mistake or tense if I happen to notice them (sorry if I missed any).

Since this volume didn't originally include the pictures I did my best again for translating the color pages (google translate plus looking at how it's phrased in the text). Hopefully I didn't mess it up too badly.

You may also notice that the cover and alternate cover are very similar for this volume. It may be because it's so new it doesn't have a proper alternate cover yet, or it may be that I found the wrong image, or they might just be very similar. I'm not sure, but I couldn't even find an "alternate cover" for the next volume. I guess we'll see eventually.

As a side thing, if anyone was interested in getting higher quality images from this series (I know these are small because I've made the page size small) I would recommend downloading the raw volumes from: <http://rawscans.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=12&t=14256>

Their numbering includes the short stories and side stories, not just the main series, so it can be a bit hard to find a specific novel, but eventually I just downloaded it all and renamed them. This is where I got most of my images from, and they're all pretty high quality. The only thing is the site only allows you to download one link at a time, the download takes a while, then you have to wait like an hour to download another. But it's worth it for the images in my opinion. (Also I would stick with just the numbered links. For me the "text" link gave me all the pictures but they were low quality and none of the text came through right).

Anyway, enjoy the penultimate volume, and I'll see you next time!

~Moonfaerie24

Full Metal Panic!

Always Stand by Me (Part 1)

By Shoji Gotoh



Translator: 顏掌 Translations (Mister V)

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Prologue

Unpleasant-looking letters were written near the names of schools he hoped to enter “all “D”s and “E”s, instead of “B”s and “A”s. Of course it was the results chart of the nation-wide mock entrance exams. He had returned to look at it several times during the day, but naturally, the contents didn’t change. Looking at that piece of paper with vague revulsion, Shinji Kazama sighed miserably. He understood very well where those results came from: in the English test, weird sentences he didn’t remember seeing before; in world history, a question about some South American country; and in ancient literature, of all things – the Tale of Genji.

Come on - why Genji? That thousand-year-old fantasy of empty love for love’s sake, written by a woman abandoned by some playboy - and this decides modern people’s lives...?

Shinji was lost in those dark thoughts, but even though he saw that the world was decidedly unfair, results were everything - and his were far from satisfactory.

And it was already January of the last year of high school; the main exam was only a week away. It was a grave situation indeed.

He let out another sigh. Thinking that nothing could be done, he lifted his eyes and gazed forlornly at the classroom. It was lunch break, but the atmosphere in class 3-4 was quite tense. Students were either intently staring at their books, or fast asleep, tired from all the studying. A group of girls who took the test together with him were quietly discussing the results. Some boys were pretending not to be concerned - “eh, what test?” - and were playing a card game. There were people who had already decided

on their future careers, but mostly, his classmates were enveloped by the same uneasiness that stuck to them like a wet silk gown. The feeling of having something always stuck inside your chest that makes it impossible to laugh from the bottom of your heart, even at the best of jokes.

Their future careers, however, were not the only reason for that general feeling of anxiety, especially for those who were in class 2-4 the previous year. The fate of Kaname Chidori and Sousuke Sagara was on their minds. They disappeared from school almost a year ago. For a time, news reporters and journalists were making a fuss by gathering at the front gate of the school, but they disappeared, too; the repairs of the school building were finished before summer vacation. The culture and athletic festivals went by as usual, and the school became very quiet. No explosions at unexpected times, no angry shouts from Kaname, no screams of students caught in the turmoil, and no emergency broadcasts from Kagurazaka-sensei. It returned to being a normal school, like it was before Sousuke first came there. However, Atsunobu Hayashimizu had already graduated, principal Takako Tsuboi moved to a different school. Her change of post was not directly related to the incident, but after something like that happened, staying there was unreasonable, and she went through the motions and quietly moved on, even though she honestly wanted to stay. She announced it at the graduation ceremony in March, and true regret could be heard in her voice.

“I would have very much liked to stay as principal, and wait together with you for your friends’ return, no matter how much time it takes...”

Those words sounded more like a farewell to Kaname Chidori, making Shinji feel that their return was something very improbable. This was not a simple kidnapping. The Japanese

police were conducting their own investigation, but that of course was not something they could freely talk about. Kaname's school register was taken away "for the purposes of the investigation", and her absence was treated as an absence from school for an indefinite term. If she ever returned, she would have to start again from second year, and her classmates would already have graduated by then, so nobody knew if she would want to remain in that school. As to Sousuke, it soon became known that his profile in the school register was a fake, so the probability of his return was zero. However, the words that he had said in front of his class - that they will definitely be back - were etched into everyone's memory.

What were the chances of that happening? Shinji could understand, perhaps better than anyone else, sharing Sousuke's military mania. He could at least, better than an ordinary student, imagine just how powerful and cunning the terrorist and military intelligence organizations could be. No one could take them on alone, not with their virtually unlimited resources, skilled professional personnel and network of connections. And if something like the "Amalgam" Sousuke talked about existed, its power would be truly frightening. Though Shinji honestly didn't even hear of such organizations before, it seemed more like an urban legend. But if it was real, Sousuke wouldn't probably even be able to find her location... he could even be dead by now. Shinji often fell prey to such dark thoughts.

Ever since the incident, Shinji had been hunting for traces of Sousuke's current activities. He was trying to find any clues in different incidents around the world that might tell him that Sousuke was involved (and this search helped him escape the stress of the exams, which was why he didn't really study English).

He couldn't find anything, and after thinking it over, realized that this was an obvious result. An organization like that wouldn't leak information that an ordinary high school student could find.

So, what if Sousuke was still alive, and looking for Kaname? On the one hand, days full of mortal danger. On the other, days of stress before exams. He felt like laughing at the difference between his and Sousuke's situation.

At that moment his friend, Koutarou Onodera, returned from somewhere and plunked himself down onto the chair in front of Shinji.

“Sold out, as usual,” It looked like “Ono-D” just returned from the bakery in a foul mood, as he tore open the wrapping of the bread roll and stared at it with annoyance.

“You could’ve bought something in the store on the way.”

“I did, but I got hungry after second period.”

“Eeh...”

Their dispirited conversation continued for a while until Koutarou noticed the exam result sheet.

“Ah, no luck with the mock exam?”

“Mmm.”

Before he could think of something to answer, Koutarou snatched the sheet of paper.

“Ha, lemme see... woah, you’ve really done it. It’s full of ‘D’s!’”

“The questions sucked. You wouldn’t do better anyway.”

“Hah, I’ll be fine, I’ll study properly.”

“Exam’s next week...”

“Oh shut it.”

“I was kinda worried about Tokiwa-san... I don’t think she even touched her studies.”

“Mm... yeah, but she’ll get a recommendation, for sure. She did say she’d work in a toy company or something.”

“Aha, well, she was fierce about her studies after leaving the hospital...”

The person who visited her most in the hospital, where she stayed for some time after the incident, was Koutarou. Shinji also went to see her once or twice, but Koutarou was there so much he sometimes looked pathetic.

After she left the hospital they ended up in the same class, and with Kaname gone, Koutarou replaced her at Tokiwa’s side and they started spending a lot of time together. They were definitely close friends by now, though when asked, Koutarou didn’t want to acknowledge a relationship. Even though apparently they went to the sea together over summer vacation, he continued saying that nothing happened, though no one knew for sure.

“Is Tokiwa-san coming today?”

“Dunno. She did text me, saying she just finished her check-up.”

Today Kyouko had skipped the first half of the day and went to the local hospital for a thorough medical check. While there were no serious after-effects of the injury, sometimes she had light convulsions in the fingers of her left hand. Apparently the reason for that was not physical, but mental.

“Must be tough.”

“Eh, what?”

“On Tokiwa-san I mean. With all that happened...”

“Sure, she had to go through all that,” grumbled Koutarou, slowly sipping his coffee milk. “You know...”

“Hm?”

“She started talking about the time when she got hurt, recently.”

Shinji was honestly surprised. After leaving the hospital, she looked in almost physical pain during any conversation that even remotely reminded her of the incident.

“So, what did she say?”

Koutarou hesitated.

“Well...”

“Come on, what is it?”

“Eh, it’s about Sagara.”

“Sagara-kun? Really?”

“That he was desperately trying to save her. That he dismantled the bomb that was tied to her, even though he knew it was a trap.”

Shinji remained silent and let him finish.

“And I said all those things to him... I really regret them now.”

“Well, you can’t really blame yourself; it was pretty scary back then...”

“Yeah...”

Shinji could guess that whoever abducted Kaname and held Tokiwa prisoner was dangerous enough. The black AS that swiftly laid mines all around the school did not appear in any military-related magazines, no matter how much Shinji looked. It was a wonder that no one died then – and they owed their lives to Sousuke and that white AS. Of course, there were still many students who resented him for bringing peril to the school, and Koutarou was one of them. That day he grabbed Sousuke by the collar and shouted at him: “Weren’t you our friend?!?” Since then he hadn’t spoken his name even once.

“You know, Ono-D... I was thinking...”

“Hm?”

“Well, I... I was thinking that Sagara-kun probably was trying his best, no..?”

“Where’d you get that idea from...”

Koutarou made a face like he had swallowed something unpleasant - a childishly stubborn, but clear refusal to accept this idea.

“Besides, Tokiwa almost died because of him, that’s a fact. If he’d just disappeared earlier...”

“Do you really think so?”

“Eh, what are you talking about...”

“You don’t think it’s right to apologize, like Tokiwa-san?”

“What? Why would I do that? It’s his fault.”

“Really... then why d’you think she started to talk?”

“Huh...”

“Don’t you think it’s because she was thinking the same thing? That she was really sorry?”

“Uh... I... don’t really...” mumbled Koutarou, staring at Shinji with a pained expression on his face. “I dunno, really.”

“You know, I... thought of doing something.”

“Wha?”

“Well, we won’t be able to get everyone together in February, so maybe in the middle of January we could do a group picture.”

“And... what?”

At that moment Kyouko entered the classroom.

“Ah...”

“Oh, here she is.”

She exchanged a few words with a group of girls standing near the door, then came their way. She was now wearing contact lenses instead of glasses. Her childish pigtails were gone, too, and her hair was shoulder-length. She was wearing simple, but very

effective makeup, which only added to the impression that she suddenly grew up. Her usually innocent face also seemed to be darkened by what happened.



“Good morning, Kazama-kun.”

“Oh, hi.”

She smiled to Shinji first, then lightly tapped Koutarou’s shoulder.”

“Hi, Ono-D!”

Her voice was unexpectedly clear and energetic. Her outward appearance might have changed, but her personality remained more or less the same.

“Hey. How’d it go?”

“What?”

“The check-up.”

“Results next week, but nah, I don’t think there’s anything wrong.”

“Ah, good.”

“Hm, were you worried about me?”

“Me? No, just asking,” Koutarou smiled back. Kyouko puffed up her cheeks and poked him, feigning anger. While they were busy being all playful, the bell rang for the start of the fifth period.

“Already? Man...”

“Phew, lucky I made it in time!”

“How can you be so serious about this? I’d skip the rest of the day, for sure.”

“Id-i-ot~”

They returned to their seats as the students started flooding the classroom, making seemingly as much noise as possible in the short while before the start of the lesson. Some boys were looking at their phones and talking to friends in front of them. Phrases like: “hey, did you hear? There’s war” “eh, what?” “Heard it on the news, war or something” “Where?” “Dunno, in lots of places,

preparations for war or something” “Eh... watch out, Fujisaki’s coming.” “Oh dammit”.

The conversations promptly died out after the ancient literature teacher’s figure appeared in the classroom door. What was that all about? Shinji thought it was something about the Middle East again, or some border dispute in Africa, and didn’t think twice about it. The central exam - that’s what was important.

“Nobody absent? Good, good. Well then, let’s do a quick final test. I know, you’re all tired, but hang in there. You’re almost done.”

Test forms were quickly distributed after the teacher finished talking.



Shinji learned of the news only on the train back home. The headlines of a newspaper extra that a tired salaryman was reading caught his eye, and he suddenly felt a cold chill running down his spine.

It was not just some border dispute in Africa. The two superpowers and their allies were locked in a serious crisis that threatened to escalate into the nuclear dimension. It looked like preparations were going on in Europe, the Middle East and even in the Arctic.

And that was not all. Even before that, he had seen in the news that the world was now in the grips of deep energy and food crises, and the worst market crash in a century signaled the beginning of a very profound recession. In the Soviet Union, a politician known for his extremist comments seemed to have the full support of the military circles.

Even so, war...?

Both camps' armed forces were at full combat readiness, but it did not look like more than just another round of trying to scare the opponent into backing down. But if allowed to escalate, the situation could become very bad, very fast, and there would be no return.

However, the evening train was as peaceful as ever, without a hint of uneasiness or anxiety drifting in the air. *Why doesn't anyone worry about that? There might be a nuclear war... their lives might end suddenly... Here's a student desperately trying to memorize words out of a dictionary, for the test that should get him into the school he wanted to attend, even though it might be destroyed very soon, along with everything else.* This peace irritated him like never before. Shinji suddenly felt the need to talk to Sousuke. What would he say to him in that situation? How would the peaceful scenery look to him, used to crossing the line between peace and war in the blink of an eye...?

Chapter 1: Calm before the Storm

Sir Edmond Mallory Junior was ready to confront his father. As the founder of Mithril, the organization that was already almost gone. As the son who had been deceived for decades.

He was driving alone, without an escort. It was an old, rusty Toyota he bought off a used car dealer, and he had been driving to the west of London for four hours. He then passed near Halford, on the border of Wales, and continued driving north for an hour and a half.

He went into hiding about a year ago, and planned on ending this game of hide-and-seek today. The constant unpleasant drizzle and low greyish clouds overhead made the dull passage of endless low meadows downright miserable. Soon, a small village came into view - a village he hadn't seen in thirty-eight years. It looked the same as when he was a little boy. A never changing sight... the small cluster of houses with a small church near them remained the same for a hundred - no, three hundred years.

Edmond stopped the car, and got out. He checked his Browning and put it in the pocket of the cheap parka that he was wearing, and started walking straight to a small house near the church. He walked down the muddy path, and his gait became more and more heavy. He distinctly felt the steel of the 9mm in his pocket, and the raindrops landing on his cheeks... both were cold as ice.

He finally came to the flimsy-looking wooden door that led into the house. After a small pause, he kicked it once - it did not come off. Again, and again - the hinges finally gave way, and it fell inside. Pistol at the ready, he stepped into the cabin, his body

moving by itself, remembering the Navy SEALS training he had once received. His combat posture was still perfect, even though he was now over fifty years old, and he kept every square inch of that house in check.

He passed the empty dining room, and went further. He came into the bedroom, and saw an ancient man sitting in an old rocking chair. A small eight-inch LCD television on a side-table was showing BBC news. It was already two weeks since the beginning of the crisis, and the situation only worsened.

Insurgencies simultaneously erupted in Poland, on the Balkan Peninsula, and in Kurdistan, and both sides were taking harsh measures against them. The armies of the Warsaw Pact were conducting large-scales exercise and were preparing to test-launch nuclear missiles as part of them. All NATO member countries switched to a wartime command structure, to be “prepared for the worst”. There were unconfirmed reports of small-scale military conflicts happening all over the world.

In the dim light of the LCD screen Edmond saw the weary face of the old man - Lord Mallory, his father.

“Sir Mallory... so you came,” the old man said, acting as if he had not noticed the gun in his hands. His father always called him that, since he held the title of baron even when he was a child. He never liked the name “Rod”, and always preferred to be called “Sir Mallory”. One of the reasons was to distinguish himself from his father, but due to his bravery during his Navy career he became a knight of the Order of the Bath, and the splendid title was fully deserved.

“I thought you would come sooner.”

“I came as fast as I could.”

“I see...”



He shut a Bible that he was holding and gently put it on the side table. Edmond suddenly noticed that his hands were much thinner than when he saw him last time, a year earlier.

“You do know this place, don’t you?”

“Yes, and no one else, besides me, you, and the butler Dent. Yes, I remember. Dent passed away quite some time ago, that makes two.”

Every year in the summer the father and the son would go to that village together for a week. They left their mother and sister at home, and stayed in that small house, not even going out hunting or horse riding. His father did not even let in the butler, who became worried once and went to check on them. They did simple chores together - chopping firewood, getting water from the well, cutting the chicken for dinner.

There was nothing particularly harsh about that life, but to the son of a nobleman it was a source of precious experience. There Edmond Junior learned the life of a normal person, not the heir of House Mallory. He didn’t want to admit it, but everything he learned here became useful later - both in Eaton and the military.

Lord Mallory looked outside, his eyes glazed.

“Dent... what would he say if he saw us now?”

“He’d think it’s pitiful.”

“Mmm, would he now. Maybe he’d understand.”

“Him? Why?”

“When you were injured in the Falklands, he came to me with a bottle of wine - Cheval Blanc, of the year that you were born, to celebrate. He said, ‘Sir Edmond is now a real man, not in any way less distinguished than you, sir’.”

It was unclear from his father’s expression whether he was praising him, or lamenting the fact. Nevertheless, Dent was right. He went there not to ask for his father’s advice, but to settle things.

“You came to kill me, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Edmond’s reply came very quickly.

“I'd like you to listen to me first... the reason I betrayed, the reason I sold Mithril out to them...”



That old man, Lord Mallory, was one of the central figures in the creation of Mithril. The mystery around the nuclear missile that was used in the Gulf War, the rapid escalation of the confrontation between the two superpowers, and ethnic, religious and ideological conflicts all across the world, the food and energy crises – those innumerable little coals, smoldering, giving sparks... Left alone, they would lead the world to inevitable destruction in the twenty first century. It was not about national interests. Politicians, bureaucrats, military in every country would not be able to deal with those crises. The reasoning was that when the prescriptions of the physician did not have any effect, it was time for the surgeon's scalpel. Mithril was supposed to be the scalpel, performing extremely precise strikes with ease. The Mallorys themselves were a bit like the Tracy family from “Thunderbirds”, though their goal was saving people from war, not natural disasters.

The budget was by far not the first problem when the organization was created. It was possible because of what Lord Mallory did in his time. By various methods House Mallory assembled a great amount of real estate, a group of corporations, various intellectual property, and vast connections of Lord Mallory himself. The main problem was finding talented individuals. There was no point in having hundreds of millions of pounds' worth of hardware without the people to use it. What they needed were professional soldiers who had experience, skill, and above all, faith in the cause. Those would be people much younger than those Lord Mallory knew.

There was no person better suited to take care of that problem than his son. Sir Mallory was a hero of the last war, having received the Order of the Bath for the rescue of the crown prince, who crashed in a helicopter on territory controlled by the enemy. Afterwards he was sent on missions as a military or intelligence officer, and helped prevent several crises. Mallory was able to gather an impressive number of talented people, thanks to his son's scouting.

Those thoughts were on his mind, as he looked at his son bitterly.

“I risked everything for this organization. I supported your ideas, I was proud of you. I was happy that you were going to inherit anything that would be left after me. When you were in the army, I thought you would see the reality, the worst this world has to offer, and start believing that something can be done about it - and this organization would be the goal.”

“And this in itself was all an illusion.”

Lord Mallory answered in a weary voice:

“Think about it... ‘Mithril’, a fictional metal invented by a linguist with an overly active imagination.”

“And you were laughing at us, all the time?”

“I only hoped it would become real. I wanted to see an evil that had to be defeated, and a silver sword that would defeat it.”

“Well, we became it, didn’t we?”

“No, that did not go as planned.”

“Because of what you did. You were the founder of Mithril, and you communicated with Amalgam at the same time. Before their attacks, you conveniently disappeared as if you knew they were coming. I know the codes they use - the stock prices of a spinning machine manufacture that you own. Those numbers would then be converted into a table of random numbers by way of

some mathematical formula published in an obscure trade journal, and used as access keys.”

It was a simple method, but very hard to decipher, and easy to use in conjunction with modern telecommunications technology. A modern analyst would overlook such old tricks, and whereas a spy from the fifties would probably recognize it, modern intelligence agencies didn’t.

“Those stock prices are my personal cipher only. But you did a thorough job on that.”

“I saw that trade journal in your office. Some numbers were marked, and the same thing was in other articles. After I noticed it, I’ve been assembling evidence for the past six months - it took a long time because I was in hiding.”

“And after confirming your suspicion, you wanted to confront me in person.”

“All things have to be done in order.”

“Hmm... that’s so very like you.”

“Still, I don’t understand. Why? You didn’t just create this organization for your amusement? To throw away when you’re tired of it?”

“Of course not,” said Mallory senior very quietly, making a grimace of self-derision. “Mithril’s too big for a toy.”

“Then I would like to hear your answer. This... is not like you at all. Lead the enemy and abandon the organization you yourself created - to come live here as a hermit? I could shout at you all I want, but I don’t understand the reason. Why?”

He was speaking as if he was a rebuke because of an adultery committed by his father.

“You have no idea...”

“Of what exactly?”

“You know, I could say that Mithril is like an illegitimate child to me. Fighting the Amalgam that I spoiled so much... a tool that makes its own rules. The eternal struggle between order and chaos, good and evil... the balance between them that was always there since the days of legend, and seems such a commonplace phenomenon...”

“...Spoiled?”

“Son... you know nothing about Amalgam yet. Its origin. The dream from which it was born.”

“Dream..? What a foolish-..”

At that moment, Sir Mallory’s right hand that was holding the gun exploded in a fountain of blood - or he thought it had. He was thrown off and must have pressed the trigger instinctively as a shot went into the wall. For a moment he thought it was a gun discharge, a bullet somehow exploding in the grip - but that was impossible. He must have been shot through the window, as his hand was just above the level of the window sill.

Who was it? Since when were they watching? How did he hit him?

Questions rushed through his head. He instinctively hid away from the window, and looked at his hand. The pain was as strong as if everything below the elbow was blown away, but everything looked fine - except the little finger was missing, and a lot of blood was pouring out.

Idiot, I’m an idiot, he thought, scolding himself for being so negligent. He didn’t even think about his father. The instincts of an ambushed soldier kicked in, and cursing himself even more, he started to reach for the dropped gun.

Before he could reach it, however, a man, clad in fully black, jumped out of the kitchen doorway, rolled over the bed, and kicked away the gun. He then struck Mallory junior in the temple

with the gunstock of the SMG that he was carrying. The latter felt as if something exploded inside his head, and losing all sense of equilibrium, he noticed that his own body fell down, as his mind started plunging into darkness.

He was still barely conscious as he saw the face of the man, who came closer. It looked like he was the commander of the team that had just come into the house. The grey beard and moustache... the always gloomy face, with features as if chiseled from marble. He looked even older than Mallory senior, but that was of course an illusion. In fact, that man was about the same age as Edmond himself, someone he knew very well...

“A-Andrei Kalinin...”

“Sir Mallory. It has been a while,” said the other in an almost friendly voice. Yes, it was the former commander of Mithril’s West Pacific assault troop.



The assault took them less than a minute. Under Kalinin’s orders they gave first aid to Mallory and searched him thoroughly. It didn’t look like they were planning to kill him just yet, and he didn’t lose consciousness because of the pain in his hand. His father remained in his chair as if nothing unusual had happened, even though he must have been surprised as well. It was not a trap laid by Mallory senior, he was sure of it.

Kalinin confirmed his guess:

“Sir Mallory, we had been watching you for the last two months. We could not find the location of your father by ourselves, so we started tailing you.”

“You just let me move freely for a while... and the goal was my father.”

“That is correct.”

Kalinin inclined his head a little, and his subordinates started leaving the room. He waited a while, then continued.

“Your father has some information that is important to us.”

As if expecting those words, Mallory senior said quietly:

“The name register, isn’t it.”

“What..?”

“So you did have it, Mister Mercury. Apart from the register of names there were some other things we wanted to confirm with you before your son killed you, so pardon for the intrusion.”

Edmond did not understand what Kalinin was talking about, or perhaps he did not want to.

“Register of names...? Mister Mercury? What are you talking about?”

“Amalgam also has a person who acts as chairman,” explained Kalinin patiently. “He does not necessarily participate in the entire policy making process, but he is the only person with administrative powers over everything. There are a minimum of rules - he is the one that enforces them, and observes the working of the organization. That is Mister Mercury.”

“And it was... my father?”

Sir Mallory stared at the old man in disbelief. The latter fixed his gaze on some point in space, and seemed to not hear anything that happened in the physical world.

“So, are you? Lord Mallory?”

Being irritated more and more by his father’s stubborn silence, and feeling his hand burning, he raised his voice.

“Answer, father!”

After a pause, Mallory senior finally started to speak.

“As this Russian says... I’m the chairman of Amalgam, Mister Mercury.”

“You...”

“I thought of talking with you about it sometime. When you learn things, and become mature, maybe you could be my successor - that is what I thought.”

What kind of bad joke was that? His son was already fifty years old, calling him immature was ridiculous. And “successor..?” “*I may be a traitor son to you, but I’m definitely nothing like you!*” he wanted to shout, but his father sounded more like he was trying to comfort himself, instead of criticizing him.

“I’m not ashamed of it. Originally, Amalgam was not some kind of evil organization.”

“What part of a terrorist organization that provokes armed conflict to make money is not evil!?”

“That’s now. It was different before. You know, it was created just after the war, in 1948.”

“Forty-eight..? That’s... unexpected.”

“Yes, even we did not know that,” interjected Kalinin, sounding very respectful. “We knew it was quite old, but nobody seemed to know the entire history. This man managed it all. There were possibly many people who held the title of Mr. Gold or Silver, and yet none of them knew who their predecessor was. They were only linked by the numbers in the pages of a trade journal.

Whether you call it a terrorist organization or a malevolent secret society is not important - the fact is that using only this peculiar decision-making process they managed to affect the world in such a way.”

“They didn’t know each other’s faces or names. Therein lie its power,” nodded Mallory senior. “Nobody could form or control cliques or factions inside this organization. For example, I still

remember that around the time of the Cuban crisis there were in fact three people calling themselves Mister Gold, and no one could tell who was communicating at the moment.”

“And it still worked?”

“Oh it did. One of those calling themselves Mister Gold was one of Khruschchev’s close associates. He strongly advocated the dismantling of the missiles deployed in Cuba. The others, also part of the upper echelons of power, moved to support him.”

“Now you’re just making fun of me,” snorted Edmond.

In the modern world just about anyone knew what the Cuban missile crisis was all about. In 1962, Soviet middle-range missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads were deployed in Cuba, which to the United States was the equivalent of a gun at their throat, and they reacted in full force. The tension between the two opponents was at an unprecedented level, and people were seriously considering the possibility of an all-out nuclear war. It was a critical moment that decided the fate of humanity as a whole. The resultant military crisis was solved because of the individual will of the leaders of the two countries; but Mallory senior was implying that Secretary General Khruschchev was acting under influence from Amalgam. Did that not mean that Amalgam had actually saved the world..?

“You’re probably thinking, son: how can it be that my enemy saved humanity? And you don’t want to believe it,” said the old man, as if Edmond’s thoughts were laid out clearly before him. “But as I said many times, Amalgam was at first an organization built on a dream. The dream that after the downfall of Nazi Germany we would be able to start anew - it was menaced by the Cold War. A lot of people thought the same, both in the East and the West. My grandfather, who held an important position in the military intelligence created this organization with four like-

minded people: an American oil magnate, a Russian scientist, a German officer of the SS and a Japanese trader. Add to them my grandfather, with his enormous wealth in real estate and knowledge of cryptography..."

"They were only five?"

"Five of the brightest men of their time, five geniuses. Despite their completely different backgrounds and beliefs, they were united in their dream of a future for humanity. Their principles divided them, but that union was made for one purpose - to guide the world from the shadows. That is why they named themselves 'Amalgam'."

"'Future for humanity', of all things... what insolence" murmured Kalinin. "Mithril was very much the same, wasn't it? Though the slogans they brandished were a little different."

"Even now you speak like a filthy traitor..."

"I only speak the truth... I see that a part of the power that the idea of those five people is alive in you" his words sounded like a gloomy joke.

Sir Mallory was not a hypocrite or a stubborn believer. He fully realized how correct Kalinin's observation really was.

"All right. I understand the so-called dream of Amalgam. I even see its results. I can guess that afterwards things went the usual way."

"Unfortunately, yes. As Amalgam's network expanded, the number of members increased. The five founders eventually retired, and their titles were taken by newcomers. In twenty years, until about the end of the sixties, the size of the organization was such that members could barely grasp its extent."

"The bog of the Vietnam war, then?"

"Amalgam didn't participate in everything, of course, but you could say it was one of the reasons the war dragged on. The

number of people in the leadership that thought that the end of the war would be a loss increased, and perhaps they didn't notice it themselves... and then they just started acting in their own interest for personal gain. Plans that strayed from the organization's ideal, conflicting interests, final decisions that were watered-down compromises... And as internal resistance increased, they started playing unfair. New rules were made on the spot, it was as if everyone was trying to cheat at a game of dice.”

“And then thirty years, and a new generation.”

“Yes, the ones that are in it now have nothing to do with the original idea. Fools drunk with their might, playing vulgar power games.”

It was clear that the organization departed from its lofty goal and turned into a grossly obese creature whose only concern was its personal safety. It was a quite typical case of corruption. No matter how many brilliant men it assembled, and how novel a system it adapted, in the end it could not escape from this decay.

“All right, so it's become a sort of mass council without any idea or goal. And the part that remained, the one that wished to survive at any cost, made managing this organization even less feasible.”

“True. I succeeded my father as the head of the organization about twenty years ago. It was already unmanageable then. The title of ‘Mister Mercury’ had quite a reputation, but my role was not giving speeches - it was management. Maintaining the organization’s network, excluding those who violated its rules, not allowing anyone to interrupt the conversation of the staff... but trying to make anyone listen to the original idea would be futile. And besides, Mister Mercury’s authority rested on the fact he was impartial, and did not have his own interests. My hands were tied.”

“You couldn’t even try to destroy the network? Without it, the organization would probably fall apart.”

“Impossible,” Mallory senior sighed deeply. “Fifteen years ago I was seriously considering my options, because I wanted to destroy it. Then there were of course no online meetings, like now; instead, we communicated through classified advertisements, which contained encrypted data, in select newspapers around the world. Every leader had his own cipher key, that they created themselves. Just as I used stock prices of my company, some used for example the figures that came up in the weather report of America’s East Coast, or the string of characters in a tabloid’s daily column. I imagine the authors of those gossip stories had no idea how their petty work was used... Anyhow, it was not possible to somehow destroy their own means of encryption. Several backup lines of communication were always available, and above all, nothing could be done about public means of communication. And now, because of the Internet, next to nothing can be done to disrupt their communications.”

Mallory senior glanced at Kalinin and continued.

“Though Mister Silver seems to have done just that.”

“He does have a limited ability to see the future. This allows him to predict ciphers and used protocols, and analyze their use,” nodded Kalinin matter-of-factly.

“So did he use some kind of virus?”

“To put it simply, something like that. It’s not only an electronic virus, however, but one that has psychological effects. It took him quite a while.”

Sir Edmond felt he could not fully grasp the meaning of the conversation between his father and Kalinin. It sounded like one of the members of the organization was trying to seize control from inside, and succeeding. The pain in his wound had no intention of

stopping, and he would have been shouting and cursing, if it wasn't for the presence of those two.

“What was I talking about again... Ah, yes, - as I said, I was not able to do anything to stop this grossly inflated organization.”

“I got it already. Is that why you created Mithril?”

“Correct. If I could do nothing from the inside, I would create an outside threat, to check Amalgam's unpredictable movements. Since that time... the nuclear warhead in the Gulf War. The pinnacle of Amalgam's hubris...”

The one mysterious nuclear strike, that was the reason of the appalling situation the Middle East was in. And this was also the handiwork of Amalgam.

“I decided then that it was absolutely necessary to create an organization to stop them.”

“Oh, really. Such a noble goal that motivated you?”

“There was no other way.”

“I only see that you hid, while the two organizations you betrayed battled each other, while you sold them out to each other. Even if, for argument's sake, we suppose that you had a good goal, this little game of yours is inexcusable. What a splendid combination of cowardice and arrogance!”

“You are acting like a child, stop it.”

But Sir Mallory did not have any intention to calm down.

“You did not only betray those organizations, but me! Your son! You used, manipulated me to get the people you needed for the organization!”

“It was a job you were suited for. A romantic in a pragmatist's hide, who else could become the brains behind Mithril?”

“How dare you...”

“Your reaction is that of disappointment, is it not? If you were a real Mallory, you would be disappointed in yourself for not anticipating your father’s actions.”

Edmond never felt such a tremendous anger in his life. He was fully aware of the fact that he was ready - no, he wanted to kill his father with his own hands that very moment. On his way from his hiding place in London he had asked himself many times - would he really be able to shoot his own father? Now the question would not ever appear.

“I’m glad I took away your gun,” calmly observed Kalinin, who was watching him.

“His intent is quite clear, isn’t it, Mister Kalinin? Now, you had something you wished to discuss. Do I have to finish my story quickly?”

“No, it’s already quite fine.”

Kalinin also probably did not know most of the organization’s history, and its relation to different incidents, but was also able to get a general understanding during that conversation. He no longer wished to see a quarrel between father and son.

“So, can I now ask you to kindly hand over the ‘register of names’?”

Hearing Kalinin’s firm request, Mallory senior frowned.
“It is incomplete.”

“That does not matter,” quickly answered Kalinin, as if expecting the answer. “You, sir, should know at least the leadership of the organization from its founding and up to now. There were many examples of Mister Mercury expelling members for violating rules - by letting other members know his name.”

That was, however, all that the manager could do, without taking direct action, otherwise he would risk losing the trust of the other members.

Leonard Testarossa's ability of predicting the future, no matter how limited, allowed him to understand more or less the current status of the organization and its membership, but he did not know anything about the past. The only person who did was Mister Mercury.

“So, what do you plan to do with the data about past members? They're mostly gone now.”

“Information on a need to know basis, sir.”

Yes, Mallory senior did not need to know anything. The group to which Kalinin belonged already had information on most members, and for all intents and purposes has seized power within Amalgam. Information about the present was quite worthless to them. The past, however, was a quite different thing, especially about Amalgam around eighteen years ago. That was the turning point. If the modern world had to be returned to the right path, the Amalgam that existed then could prove useful. This information would be a sort of reference for the creation of the next world, and for that, she had to know the register of names. Kalinin was only obeying orders.

“Mister Kalinin... as the manager of that organization, there is a line that I cannot cross. Otherwise I would be selling them out.”

“And you are prepared to defend this ‘line’ at any cost?”

The sudden bout of faithfulness seemed absurd. That person created Mithril, the ‘justice league’-like organization that together with Amalgam constituted a perverse self-maintaining balance. What could possibly drive that man to be so stubbornly loyal to the past of the organization?

“I’d like to see you try and get it out of me. If you’re expecting me to simply hand it over to you in a gift wrap, you are very much mistaken.”

“Then you’ll excuse me.”

Kalinin surveyed the room, paused in front of a bookshelf, and quickly started throwing all of the books out on the floor. It took him less than a minute. A cloud of putrid-smelling dust filled the room, and Edmond started coughing.

Kalinin took another book, and was about to throw it down, but then paused.

“No. Not here.”

His gaze fell upon the Bible that was lying on the small side table near Mallory senior. He took it, opened it, ran his finger along the spine of the book, and pulled once. It came off, revealing an old, yellowish piece of folded paper. Every square inch of it was packed with what was clearly a cipher - it was the “register of names”. Kalinin glanced at it, gently folded it back and put it in his breast pocket.

“...How did you know?”

“Hiding dirty secrets in the back cover of a Bible seemed like something that a person like you would do.”

“Hm, isn’t it... It only seemed appropriate to hide it in a vulgata,” nodded the old man, pointing at the Bible.

The cipher key was probably a character string in the book - a primitive measure by modern standards. With the help of an AI the analysis and breaking of the code wouldn’t even take an hour.

Mallory senior made a face like a spoiled child suddenly deprived of his favorite toy. The guess was probably right.

“Well, it seems we do not need anything from you any more, sir. You are free to do anything you wish,” said Kalinin, taking the Bible under his arm and turning towards the door.

“You’re not going to execute me?” called out Mallory senior.

“There is no reason to. You are powerless now.”

“So, I’m already part of the past, am I not?”

“Not only that. You are already a prisoner here, of your own device.”

The old man would probably not go out of that room any more. He was bound by invisible chains he had forged himself.

Kalinin glanced at the son. Mallory junior’s face was already very pale, but he could still read a cold intent to kill his father. It seemed that he had already forgotten about the pain, and his murderous intent had left him indifferent to what had happened between his father and Kalinin.

The father, who gave up on fighting against life. The son, kept conscious only by the rage of his father’s betrayal. Suddenly Kalinin realized how that sorrowful sight reminded him of himself and Sousuke, and smiled bitterly. It was even more absurd that he told that old man, - practically his own reflection - that he was a prisoner. Wasn’t Kalinin himself bound by chains of the past...?

As if driven by some impulse, Kalinin stopped, took out the gun and placed it in front of Edmond Mallory.

“This is yours.”

And he left the room without even looking back. He heard Sir Mallory grab the gun, certainly not to shoot himself.

Outside of the house he was greeted by a rain that had gotten stronger without them noticing. Two black wagons were parked around the Toyota which Mallory junior was driving not so long ago, and six subordinates waited for him, silent, under the rain.

“Let’s move out.”

His subordinates got into the vehicles, still silent, and they withdrew from the village. On the way back Kalinin thought that

those people were nothing like those he was happy to lead, only a short while ago - none of their humanity, their kindness, and their skill. However, it was easier for him that way. He did not have to listen to pointless conversations, and he did not care when one of them got injured. Yes, it was better that way.

When he was getting in the front passenger's seat of one of the wagons, he heard a muffled gunshot from inside the small house. His driver only paused for a split second, before starting the engine as if nothing had happened. There was no scream, though a voice full of bitterness and anger reached Kalinin's ears - but the wagon started moving, its wheels kicking up large amounts of dirt, and Kalinin did not hear anything else. Maybe Mallory senior was actually alive. That place... wasn't the fact that he was waiting for his son in that village only they knew about, a proof of his sincere wish to mend their relationship? Instead of being killed by some unknown assassin somewhere else, one shot, releasing him from his burden, would be a fitting end to his life. If one could not hope for at least that, then the world--

An indicator flashed on his satellite phone, indicating that the prepared communication channel was open.

“I got the register.”

“Good. Come back quickly,” he heard Leonard’s voice over the line. Besides the negligible time lag, the channel was perfectly clear. “It’s also generally going fine here.”

“Generally? Is there a problem?”

“My sis and her crew sniffed us out somehow. Well, satellite communications aren’t that safe, it was a matter of time, really.”

“Our counter?”

“I think I’ll let the US Navy do the work. Trying to sink the ‘Toy Box’ with all they got” in fact, they were supposed to engage them right about then.



“Conn, sonar! Torpedo - bearing one-two-oh distance twenty-five hundred, closing in at fifty knots!”

Almost at the same time that the sonar operator’s suddenly tense voice announced that, the main screen, depicting the map of the immediate area of the ocean, turned red and warning symbols appeared. It was a Mark 48 fired from the *USS Augusta*¹, a nuclear hunter-killer submarine of the United States Navy.

Tessa, sitting in her captain’s chair, reacted instantaneously.

“Starboard, bearing 2-9-0, hold speed.”

“Aye-aye, Ma’am. Starboard 2-9-0, holding speed,” repeated Mardukas, always by her side as her XO.

One could not call that the best maneuver for avoiding the torpedo. Standard practice would be to set course east and accelerate, and some members of the crew evidently thought so, but Mardukas remained absolutely impassive. Noticing their reaction, he only shook his head a little, which as they well knew meant “*Obey your orders, immediately*”.

As the Captain expected, the sonar soon caught another signal.

“Contact! Bearing 2-9-3 distance eight hundred, closing in at fifty knots!”

¹ USS Augusta (SSN-710) was a Los Angeles class sub, in reality decommissioned in 2008. Ironically, it was involved in the incident which clearly inspired Mardukas’ first encounter with Tessa’s father - see the translation of “Birth of the *Tuatha de Danaan*”. Gotoh just draws parallels.

“Ah, there it is,” muttered Tessa with a little satisfied smile.

If they had done things by the book, they would have walked straight into the enemy’s trap. She easily anticipated that the enemy had reinforcements, and that they would attack that way.

“Hold course. Lower speed.”

“Holding course, lowering speed, aye.”

“Open tubes three and four.”

“Open three and four, aye. Target data input complete.”

“Wonderful. Weapons free.”

“Aye-aye, Ma’am. Torpedoes away.”

Two ADCAP torpedoes left the *de Danaan*’s stern - they were nothing more than a decoy to disrupt enemy movement. One of the subs that lie ahead of the *de Danaan* had no choice but to engage in evasive maneuvers, which created a breach for them.

The first torpedoes were fired from the stern, and were rapidly approaching, as the numbers on the screen showed. Seven hundred yards, six hundred, five...

Now’s the time.

“Hard to starboard, 3-3-5. Engine stop, EMFC to passive.”

“Aye, starboard 3-3-5. Full stop, EMFC in passive mode.”

Having waited to attract the enemy torpedoes close enough, Tessa made the ship perform a steep turn, at the same time engaging the EMFC, a system that, together with a special alloy covering the hull of the ship, drastically reduced the resistance of the sea water.

The maneuver sent the enormous hull of the *Tuatha De Danaan* gliding through the water like a car on ice. It was unimaginable for an ordinary submarine.

The floor or the control room inclined steeply, and everything that was not affixed began sliding towards the port side.

“...Incoming!”

The guidance system of the enemy torpedo was not made to follow such rapid and irregular movement, and it detonated around six hundred and fifty yards away. The felt the impact of the shockwave as the control room shook and the main screen flickered.

“EMFC to active! Course 1-1-0, fire one and two when ready!”

“Aye, Ma’am! EMFC active. Course 1-1-0, weapons free.”

Because of the timing of the launch, the enemy sonar would not be able to detect the opening of the launch tubes of the *de Danaan* behind the detonation. They were now firing from a drifting maneuver at the enemy that was behind them.

“One and two away.”

“Excellent. Port, ahead, one-third, course 0-4-0. Take her to nine hundred, down twenty degrees rudder. We will break through them on a north-north-eastern heading². ”

“Yes, Captain.”

Even though it was a retreat, Mardukas sounded relieved. The remaining enemy torpedoes would be completely confused by the detonations and after a few minutes their safety switches would kick in, bringing their engines to a stop, and they would sink quietly into the depths of the ocean. The torpedoes fired by the *de Danaan* would not explode even if they hit their target. Those were only Amalgam’s pawns, who were probably themselves curious as to why they suddenly had to hunt down the “Toy Box”. He wanted to avoid bloodshed if at all possible... but the other side was

² The slang used here is a mix of the real thing (as far as I could find) and some elements from Gotoh I had to keep - for example, the text says “rudder down”, though in reality the rudder would only control left or right turns as far as I could find out; but I would consider it appropriate to keep the expression because of the futuristic technology of the TDD. In a revision I will perhaps consider a more realistic approach.

“serious”, firing at them with live ammunition, so to speak. And they didn’t even fire a shot until the last possible moment, obeying seemingly nonsensical orders...



Was it necessary to go easy on the others? There were three US hunter-killer submarines, as far as they could tell, and probably at least one more below the thermal layer. If they made course corrections immediately, fired ADCAP torpedoes, ADSLMM mines and MAGROCs, all four enemies would be destroyed.

Should they try to?

If they destroyed their pursuers, their own crew, who had been on alert for more than twenty hours, could finally get some rest. Yes, it was easily done----

“Captain,” Mardukas’ voice interrupted her darkening thoughts, “should we reload the same torpedo type?”

Normally that would be the case, but if they were to proceed to annihilate the enemy, it would be tactically sound to load in two ADSLMMs. This question was Mardukas’ very indirect way of confirming her intentions. She glanced at her XO, who was standing near her as usual, and noticed that he slightly furrowed his brow. His message was obvious: *“I understand what you are thinking, but I’m against it”*.

“Yes, same type. Let us leave this area as soon as possible.”

Which was equivalent to saying *“I understand, no more attacks”*.

“Yes, captain.”

The *Tuatha de Danaan* descended to nine hundred feet and leveled out, continuing on her original north-north-east course in complete silence.



After the submarine had been taken off full battle alert, and noise reduction procedures were no longer in effect, the main hangar deck became lively once again, with maintenance crews

appearing from whatever hole they were hiding in during combat, and resuming their work. Some were busy on the rotary-engine transport, others gathered around the Arm Slaves, who looked like skeletons with their armor taken off and bare frames and wiring plainly visible. Each machine was undergoing some kind of maintenance, and Sagara Sousuke was busy helping with his.

The ARX-8 Laevatein, their only machine equipped with a Lambda Driver, and possibly the second most powerful in the world. It was white with sections of dark red armor on it, and compared to the M9 Gernsbacks it looked very aggressive.

That said, there was not much Sousuke could help with in terms of maintenance. He mostly did simple things that the maintenance crew trusted him with, as a show of good faith towards the machine's AI. And if he touched any of the parts himself, Lieutenant Sachs (the one leading the crew) would probably be enraged beyond reason. It was like that in any army in the world - the maintenance people thinking of the machine they were responsible for as their own, "lending" it to the pilot for a sortie.

<Please reset the alignment of the sixth cartilage unit on the right arm to point-twelve > the request, both in vocal and text form, came from Al, the machine AI.

"The sixth again? You just told us to reset it to point-zero-five," said Sousuke, speaking in the headset microphone.

<We found out later that the wear levels of muscle packages three-two to three-seven were more than initially assumed. Please set it to point-twelve.>

"Right," Sousuke gave instructions to the nearest mechanic.

The man nodded and made a minute adjustment on a small damper-like part, the artificial cartilage unit.

<It seems that it should be point-zero-five, please return it.>

“What is it this time?”

<At point-twelve the first ten muscle packages bear all the pressure. I conclude that operations should be performed with the setting at point-zero-five.>

Sousuke decided to bear with the complaints for now, and told the mechanic. The latter shrugged, and followed the machine's own instructions.

“Done. Satisfied?”

<I am sorry, but let's try point-zero-eight.>

“Hey, look...”

<Correction. Leave at point-twelve, please.>

“Well which one is it??”

<No, I think point-fifteen would be better...>

“Think before you talk, damn it.”

<Well--...>

Sousuke switched off the comm, took off the headset and put it on the table. He was fed up with the AI ordering him around.

“So... how shall we set it?” asked the mechanic.

“Point-twelve is fine.”

The AI was going to come around to that, anyway.

Having told the mechanic his guess, Sousuke returned to his laptop, where an unfinished document laid waiting for him. The document that he had been struggling for some time with, was his own will. It was decided that the remaining members of Mithril would all take the time to compose a written document that would serve as their last will and testament, and would indicate to whom they would leave their property. Moreover, rewriting the will was encouraged, if not required every year for the members of his unit. The last time Sousuke did it was two years ago. He did not want to

touch it again, but Tessa's secretary, Viran, pestered him about it so persistently that he started the revision draft.



Writing down his possessions in a pragmatic, concise list, was not a problem. The questions came later: there was nothing particular he wanted to say to anyone, and he found it very difficult to write down something for his acquaintances, friends and comrades in arms. Would he write about what kind of person he was, what he felt during all the time he spent fighting? Honestly, it all seemed irrelevant to him. Writing about something specific? But too much happened to narrow it all down. Victories, defeats, lives saved and lives lost... It seemed already impossible to him to unravel the countless number of intertwined incidents and write something about each. If he died, there was only one message he could leave to all the living who would continue playing with fate.

“Good luck.”

That was all. Since ancient times that simple phrase, with a few variations, was the one thing dying warriors left to their comrades. They could say “God’s blessing upon you”, or “We shall meet in the other world”, but it was the same.

So, would he tell Kaname Chidori the same thing..?

No, probably not. There were too many things he wanted to tell her himself. So much that he didn’t know where to start. And at the same time he felt that no words were needed. If she returned to her real self, he imagined more or less what she would feel. She would suffer, blame herself, and start on her own road to atonement... somewhat like Tessa now. Could he even write anything to someone like her?

After he wrote “good luck” to all his comrades, he noticed that the signal lamp of the comm device was blinking. Al was calling him.

“So, finally decided?” asked Sousuke, putting on the headset.

<Let’s go with point-twelve.>

“That’s what I thought.”

It was as he expected - in fact, these days he could predict Al's behavior to some degree. He understood though that the value itself was not more than a lucky guess, there was nothing supernatural about it. It was close to seeing your dog turn his head your way, with pleading eyes, and understanding that he wanted to go for a walk.

After that Sousuke and Al continued their technical argument for a while. This time the main problem seemed to be the Laevatein's levels of wear.

<...The entire skeleton is suffering from wear and metal fatigue. For now my software with the help of maintenance can compensate, but maneuvers of over 20G should be avoided as much as possible.>

“Look, I know that...”

First of all, he himself didn't want to do any maneuvers that involved going over 20G, even momentarily. In the most extreme of cases, Laevatein could do a maneuver that would feel like being in a traffic accident over and over for several seconds. Technically speaking, the M9 Gernsback's initial design, on which the Laevatein was based, had not been conceived for such incredible strength and firepower. If one thought of it as a regular sports car outfitted with a Formula 1 engine, the various possible defects became apparent. Independent functioning time was very short, the electronic defense system was quite poor, and there were problems with cooling. And of course, maintenance. The parts of the frame suffered much more wear than those of an ordinary M9, which resulted in a loss of operating efficiency. The flashy first battle was only a pleasant dream for the Laevatein in its current state.

Based on his understanding of the machine's condition, Al posed a natural question:

<Is there a possibility that “that bastard” will appear in the next battle?>

“Maybe he will...”

They were talking, of course, about Belial, the black AS piloted by Leonard Testarossa. They learned the name of the machine from some documents they found at the mansion in Mexico. Sousuke and Al were defeated by that machine once, and a second time would be their last.

Al also held a surprising amount of animosity towards that machine and did not miss any opportunity to berate it. “Cheating bastard”, “pile of junk without his Lambda Driver”, “one-off machine that’s not worthy of being called a weapon”. Ironically, every bit of this applied to the Laevatein, but Sousuke, perhaps trying to preserve the AI’s pride, did not point it out.

“There’s no one but us to face him, you know.”

<If that is the case, we have only one deployment left.>

“Yeah...”

Sousuke lifted his eyes and surveyed the Laevatein. Miniature cracks were visible in many places.

“One more... and it should be enough.”

At that time, a general announcement sounded in the warship, and XO Mardukas’ voice proclaimed: “The meeting interrupted earlier will be continued now. Concerned personnel is to assemble in briefing room one. I repeat, the meeting interrupted by the combat situation---...”

Lieutenant Sachs of maintenance let a subordinate take over and started walking towards the hangar deck exit astern. Sousuke was also one of the “concerned personnel”. He closed the file with the unfinished will, and started putting in order his personal belongings.

<A meeting with Captain Testarossa?>

“That’s right.

<Should I also come? I could offer some useful advice. I could fill in for Sergeant Weber--...>

“Shut up.”

Sousuke threw down his headset and started walking towards the briefing room.

Tessa was the last one to enter.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting! Let’s start.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Belfangan Clouseau, who was in the room together with Melissa Mao and Sousuke. “First, the bad news. Afghanistan again, gentlemen. Several hours ago a Soviet nuclear missile base in its north-eastern part was occupied by an unidentified armed group.”

The republic of Afghanistan was at the present time under the control of the Soviet Union, which stationed a large force and built a lot of military installations on its territory. The nuclear missile base was only one of them.

“An armed group?” frowned Melissa. “If it’s in the north-east, it’s close to the border of the Soviet Union itself, right? That space is so closely monitored a surprise attack and occupation of the facility is almost impossible.”

“Well, there are some who can do it. Like us, or... them.”

“Leonard and his crew, right...”

Mao and her troops now referred to the enemy as “Leonard and his men”, not “Amalgam”. The latter had been just a faceless organization, but now it was clear that Leonard Testarossa had seized power.

“Their Lambda Driver-equipped AS could take down the main defender force in under ten minutes, I bet. And then a group of engineer supported by those Alastors could easily occupy the base.”

On the briefing room screen appeared the latest photographs from the spy satellite. Black smoke was rising from the charred wrecks of the Soviet AS and BMPs, and among them could be seen the silhouettes of the ASes occupying the base.

“So, why now, and why the missile base?” said Mao.

“No information on that. These days it looks like a nuclear war might start on its own, I doubt they want to make things even worse.”

The Americans and the Soviets were already eyeing each other very cautiously, and if word got out of an incident with a nuclear missile base, the situation would become even more strained. And even Leonard or Amalgam could not possibly want the destruction of the world. If so...

“It’s a diversion, to buy time most likely,” said Tessa.

“A diversion..?”

“I was planning to capture Merida itself, their stronghold. They would obviously want to prevent that, no matter what it takes. That’s probably the reason...”

“Capturing the missile base to make us busy for a while, because we would have to go and recover it?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t get it, Tessa...”

The Captain looked at her subordinates faces - it was as if large question marks were floating over their heads. Why was she so concerned with protecting Merida? What was there, on that island? Why was she so obsessed with it?

So far everyone was hesitating to ask the question, but she was certain someone would, and soon - what was the truth behind their fight against Leonard.

Tessa glanced at Sousuke, the only person who knew the truth. Sousuke hesitated a little, then gave her a barely discernible

nod, as if saying: “That’s as far as you can remain silent. It’s time to tell everyone.”

Why was Tessa so adamant about capturing Merida? Why was the enemy so obsessed with the island, too? The real reason? The problem was not losing the faith of the subordinates present there.

“All right. Jokes aside, I would like you to listen, and listen closely...”

Tessa took a deep breath, told them everything.

That because of a Soviet telepathy experiment gone terribly wrong eighteen years ago, information about technology from the future “leaked” into the modern world. That because of this “Black Technology” and the Whispered, that knew it, the world’s technological level was much higher than it should have normally been. And that most likely because of its influence, the world’s history changed drastically.

“Simply put,” Tessa paused and looked around the briefing room, which was completely silent, before continuing, “people who should have lived are dead, and those who should have died are alive, probably. Leonard and his subordinates are planning to correct this world. They have built a new TAROS on Merida, and will use Kaname-san’s power to change this world’s history.”

The overwhelmed subordinates remained completely silent for a while. Everyone had felt that something about the situation was unusual, but that was beyond anyone’s wildest guesses. It looked like everyone was glancing at each other dubiously, did not know what to say to Tessa, and did not want to let her think they dismissed her speech as nonsense.

Mao broke the ice.

“Tessa... I know you’re not just taking this out of thin air, but... do you think I’ll just believe this crazy story right away?”

“Hmm, I don’t think so.”

“We’re soldiers, you know. We deal in facts, pragmatic considerations, tactics and such. This kind of... fairy-tale - I don’t know what to think of it.”

“It is, however, too consistent,” muttered Commander Mardukas, the oldest person in the room and a staunch realist, who would not believe in such tales. “It had always seemed unusual to me. All these Arm Slaves and Lambda Drivers, and the rest of it. And I heard about the Whispered before. It is a preposterous story, of course, but it is logical in its own way.”

“Thank you. As I was saying--...”

“However,” Mardukas interrupted her, “there are too many things an old man like me just can’t imagine. The history may have changed, but these last eighteen years are undeniably real. If Leonard Testarossa changes history with the help of that TAROS, what would happen? A lot of my friends, for example, died in that time, and your father was one of them.”

Mao and the others were even more surprised by his words. They had no idea Tessa’s father, Carl, was his old friend.

“Would I be able to see Carl again, safe and sound?”

“I don’t think it would work as you imagine,” said Tessa. “If, after the change, this becomes the world where Carl Testarossa didn’t die, then you would not notice the change, and would think that seeing him alive, and meeting him regularly for friendly chats, is natural. The moment TAROS is used, history would change, and you would immediately accept it and live the rest of your life unaware of the change.”

“And Mithril would be gone?”

“Most probably.”

“And those three years I spent fighting together with you and my comrades, too?”

“Again, most probably, though the you in ‘that world’ would not know it. It would not have existed to begin with...”

“I will not forget my comrades.” Mardukas’ tone was unusually firm. “No matter what machine that is, I cannot forget those who died at my side.”

Unexpectedly, Tessa thought that those words suited him very well.

“I cannot, either. But speaking honestly, you would not be able to remember a person you haven’t ever met, would you?”

“That... is true.”

“This is not some kind of mass brainwashing. Reality itself would change. Be it success or failure, life or death, in any world the brain’s internal workings would respond to the reality around it. It has nothing to do with your feelings or intent.”

Mardukas seemingly could not find anything to answer.

“But Captain, I still can’t imagine it, no matter how I try,” said Clouseau hesitantly. “I, well, have read some science-fiction. In books and movies, even if you go to the past with some kind of time-machine and interfere with it... well, a new timeline branches off from that point, and a new world is born, while the old one remains the same...”

“The multiple worlds hypothesis, right?”

“Ah, yes, the so-called parallel reality. No matter what Leonard does with his weird device, nothing can have an effect on us, as we exist here and now, can it?”

“I can’t say for certain,” answered Tessa honestly. “The parallel reality concept that Clouseau-san is talking about... well, following the psycho-physical reality theory that is the Omni Sphere’s operating principle, it could go either way. It’s a bit like

the wave function of quantum physics³ - no, even simpler, it's because you can't observe both worlds at once."

"That's a bit vague... wait a second. You just said 'you can't'. Does that mean..?"

"We can," said Tessa very quietly. "When a Whispered operates the Omni Sphere, he or she can send and receive psychic waves across the space-time continuum. Even if we assume that there is a parallel world... *we* may not be able to sense it."

"I think that confused me even more," sighed Clouseau, scratching his head. "So in the end, what would happen?"

"In short, this is their plan. They would change history as convenient to them, and would be alone to retain their personalities in the 'other world'. Please try to imagine this: from tomorrow morning you'd be able to live in the world that you want, and make your own situation as good as you want? And no one else notices it besides you?"

"It's like doing whatever you want with your saved game files. How charming..."

"But it's all a trick," said Sousuke, who remained sullen as usual. "In the ruins of Yamsk 11 Leonard said he wanted to 'correct the world'... to return it to its original shape. I was suspicious of his so-called noble goal from the start, but that confirmed everything. He was just planning to steal Kaname and run off to somewhere we wouldn't know... I wouldn't know..."

"That's what's going to happen. Which is why I'm trying to disrupt his plans."

"Even so, this is all based on assumptions and suppositions, there's nothing real to grab hold onto," said Mao impatiently. "And even if everything Tessa had said is true, it has nothing to do with

³ She is referring to wave-particle duality and the uncertainty principle, it's just a pretty way to say that it could or could not happen.

ordinary people. Parallel world or not, we wouldn't know anything anyway, right?"

"Yes," Tessa answered truthfully.

"Then what's the reason for capturing Merida..? Tessa, look, I'm not blaming you or anything. If it's something important to you, I'll lay my life on the line. But the rest of the crew and my team have to understand this for themselves."

"Of course."

She understood what Mao was trying to say, and could see that others were thinking the same thing. Sousuke alone seemed to be in disagreement...

Tessa cleared her throat lightly, and continued explaining the situation to the subordinates.

"So, as I was saying, aside from me, Leonard and his men understand the situation very well. That is why they bothered to capture that nuclear missile base - to ordinary people it would seem necessary to deal with the 'immediate threat' and recover the missile base, instead of going for the island. Which one should we go for? I want to hear your answer as soldiers and professionals."

"I think it's obvious," immediately answered Clouseau.

"Yes, without question," agreed Mardukas.

"Normally it would be the missile base," shrugged Mao.

The rest, including Lieutenant Sachs from maintenance, some SRT members, and other people seemed to think the same. Tessa glanced at Sousuke, who remained silent.

"Sagara-san?"

"I..."

He hesitated for an instant. He wanted to fly right away to Merida, where Kaname Chidori most probably was at that very moment, but from a purely logical point of view he was of the same opinion, even though it went against his feelings.

“...no, it’s true... the Afghan target has to be given top priority.”

“Very well,” Tessa stood up from her seat and faced all the present crew. “It may be just a diversion, but we have to recapture that missile base in Afghanistan. They are seriously prepared to fire, if only to get us to make a move first. It does not matter to them what happens to this world, as long as they can get TAROS working.”

This was not all. They didn’t mind a large percentage of the world’s population dying; in fact, it was quite possibly convenient for them. Tessa was not convinced it was like that, but left further explanation aside for the time being.

“This is crazy.”

“It may be so, but you cannot underestimate Leonard’s charisma. His non-Whispered subordinates probably came to believe in his idea of ‘changing the world’, so making them start an apocalyptic war should be feasible.”

Everyone realized that the problem was too massive, and too complicated. What priorities should they set, and what should they do to outsmart the enemy - nobody could fully answer. The atmosphere in the room grew even more heavy and serious than before.

“So, Captain. What are you planning to do?”

Mardukas finally voiced the real question, and she looked at everyone’s expectant faces.

“Split our forces.”

“Split..?”

“We will send the helicopters. Everyone will go to Afghanistan and capture the base. Whether there is a parallel reality or not, this is your world, and your reality. Please protect it.”

“Then, you will...”

“I will return with this ship to Merida. Fortunately, I can use TAROS to pilot the *de Danaan*. This type might be old, but I can use it to operate the ship alone.

Hearing those quiet, but resolute words, Mao and the others stared at Tessa, dumbfounded.

“A-but, even so... You can’t capture an island with only this ship?! You will need an assault unit--..”

“Yes. And I will be that assault unit.”

Tessa looked at Sousuke, as if expecting this reaction. He did not show any sign of surprise at this situation, and endured everyone’s attention with absolute calm.

“Me and Sagara-san. We are the two people necessary for the operation on Merida Island. So we will go together, and we’ll take the *Tuatha de Danaan* and the Laevatein. Is this all right with you, Sagara-san?”

Sousuke nodded silently, - it was also a gesture indicating that he understood that there was no other way.

“This is suicide,” said Mao, her voice shaking with anger. “And after all this... after coming this far together, you just tell us to go do as we please?! Do you understand what you’re saying?!”

“Yes. It is as you said just a while ago. I’d like to have a reason to convince everyone that the recapture of Merida is what we should prioritize.”

“And?”

“There is none,” Tessa smiled bitterly. “No reason to make everyone follow me. I’m a Whispered, and disrupting their plan is reason enough for me. Sagara-san is an ordinary person, but his reason is simple - bringing Kaname-san back to Japan. But for you - there is none.”

No one could find anything to say.

“This ship will arrive at the last resupply point in five hours. You will then disembark and fly to Afghanistan. If you manage to recapture the base successfully, consider the battalion disbanded. You will be free to do as you please.”

“Tessa..!”

She understood painfully well what Mao was trying to say, but Tessa did not have any other answer for her.

“I’m sorry. We say goodbye today.”



The Soviet unit, which was supposed to recover the base, was coming later than Sabina expected.

They were in Badakhshan, in the north-eastern part of Afghanistan. All around them mountain ranges with peaks going over four thousand meters stretched out in all directions, creating a natural fortress. In the brilliant white of the mountains the thin line of a road zigzagged in and out of sight. It was perishing cold, - a normal battalion would not be mobilized in those conditions.

The Eligor-type AS with Sabina on board was crouching on a mountain ridge, ECS activated. She was supposed to watch for enemy movement and report back.

It was practically impossible for ordinary armored vehicles to move in those conditions, so the main force was composed, as expected, of Arm Slaves. Ten Rk-96 types, an upgraded version of the second-generation Savage. Six more behind them - newer type, called in the West Zy-98 “Shadow”, the main third generation AS of the Soviet Army. Compared to the short and stout Savages, with their egg-shaped bodies, these had a slim silhouette. Their performance far outclassed Savages, of course, and one could say that they were more or less equal to the M9 Gernsbacks used by

the US Army and Mithril. Sabina's Eligor was also a design originally derived from the Shadow.

So, sixteen ASes of different types in all. In theory, that was more than sufficient to retake the missile base from the "terrorists" that had occupied it. In theory, that was...

"This is Fowler. I've got sixteen AS units approaching from the north. How are things on your side?"

That was Lee Fowler, scouting the anticipated enemy northern approach route. They didn't even bother to use call signs because of the superior encryption of their comms.

"Got visual, just sent you the data."

"Hm... same, is it? Makes thirty-two in total. Not bad."

"There are probably transport helicopters following close behind."

"Yes, use the ASes to spearhead the assault, then rush in infantry... typical. Bah, it's no good anyway."

Their forces consisted of the two Eligors she and Fowler were piloting, four Shadow-type ASes and one infantry platoon. Even despite their numerical disadvantage, the Lambda Driver-equipped Eligors were practically invincible against regular ASes. There was nothing to worry about.

"Anyway, it looks like we'll be busy for a while. If we just had a Codarl or two..."

Codarl was another type of Lambda Driver-equipped AS that Amalgam used. It wasn't as exceptionally powerful as the Eligor type, but compared to regular models it was still more than enough.

Sabina was getting a little annoyed at Fowler's complaining.

"You know perfectly well that all the Codarls are engaged in Merida's defense. Master Leonard decided this force was

enough to accomplish our mission. Would you please refrain from expressing your dissatisfaction every damn minute?"

"Yes, yes, of course. But I've got a feeling you're the dissatisfied one."

"And why might that be?"

"You wanted to remain on Merida, didn't you? At the side of Master Leonard..."

"No. Even if I remained there, I would not be able to serve him."

And besides, that girl was on Merida. Even though she awakened in Yamsk 11, as far as Sabina could see, her character didn't change much. The same insolence, stubbornness, self-righteous demeanor. However, Master Leonard thought she was necessary, and he was not alone. In fact, pretty much everyone working with him thought of her the same way. She had the power to right this world full of wrongs, to erase things that shouldn't have happened.

He did not even look at Sabina any more, avoided any contact. Of course, she never thought she could monopolize him - he was a special man. She did not know anything specific, but she imagined that he had embraced a lot of other women besides her. She did not mind being only one of them. But...

Why did he offer his heart to that teenage girl, of all people? If it was only his body, she didn't care, but that was not the case. Even though it was platonic, ridiculously so in fact, from her point of view, he was completely enthralled by that girl.

After the girl had injured him in Mexico, he had ordered Sabina to not hold back when dealing with her. To drive her into a corner, mentally, to wear her out, to finally make a tool out of her, and Sabina felt strangely relieved. It looked like he was planning to make that girl his possession, and for Sabina, that was easy.

But before it could happen, the girl changed. After Yamsk 11, she became the leader. And it only got worse from that time on. Leonard didn't dare lift a finger on her. He reverently served her obeying every wish of that arrogant princess. And Sabina did not wish to be near him anymore.

The fact that she was at the Ishkashim base, seven thousand kilometers away from Merida, participating in a decoy operation against the remnants of Mithril, made her a little happier. She did not wish to see him like that. Even if it was an assignment that made her no more than a pawn that was ready to be sacrificed...

“I am not dissatisfied with anything. But what about you, Mister Fowler?”

“Well, a bit. It's unfortunate that I have to miss a historic moment,” came his faintly bitter voice over the radio.

“Is that really all?”

“Pretty much. If the TAROS functions as expected, I won't have any complaints.”

The people who believed in Leonard's cause had a very strong motivation. They all had different reasons, but all of them had one thing in common - they hated their past vehemently, almost fanatically. They were able to do anything to fight against the past which they frantically rejected. That way of thinking could lead them into any battle, be it reasonable or not.

Sabina, raised in the slums, and having been abused since youth, had plenty of reasons to hate the past, and it was the same for Fowler. While fighting at his side, she sometimes detected traces of the same anger that raged deep inside her. That dark anger, that smoldered like the remnants of a fire, was a proof that he left a part of himself somewhere. She heard that it had something to do with his family, that something happened to them while he was helpless to act... but she did not know more, and she

probably wouldn't hear any more from anyone else. Like herself, Fowler had only told his reason to Leonard.

Sabina adjusted the zoom on her optical sensor array. On the screen the ASes of the Soviet Army were advancing steadily. Step by step, they were getting closer to their inevitable demise.

“Shall we start?”

“I was planning on observing a little more... but oh well. Let's do a vigorous warm-up, shall we?”

“Well then...”

Sabina cut the comm channel and raised the output of her machine's palladium reactor from cruising to battle mode. The machine responded with a faint hum that grew louder. The reactor itself was, naturally, silent, but the cooling systems produced a certain amount of noise. The winter in northern Afghanistan was severe, and at the moment it was minus 13 Celsius. The heat emitted by the reactor was too much for the ECS systems to conceal.

The central machine, probably the one that was scouting the enemy with infrared sensors, spotted the disturbance. It stopped, and started scanning very carefully the ridge where Sabina was hidden. The pilot of the enemy machine evidently let his allies know of the “unknown heat source”, and was exchanging data about its position.

Yes... electronic data. On a very familiar frequency, protocols, and signal patterns. Sabina's Eligor possessed a powerful central computing unit that analyzed all that data exchange, and inserted additional data into the information exchanges, overwriting the initial battle program data into something more convenient. Casper, who died in Yamsk 11, was an expert in sniping, and she was as good as him, but in electronic

warfare. Her machine's systems were specifically modified for her, and in her Eligor she became a real witch.

Of the sixteen machines, she first attacked the six Shadows. To her, the cutting-edge electronics of the new machine were as simple as a baby raised in a sterile room. The machine went out of control, left the formation, turned towards the nearest AS and fired a missile at it. Two others raised their guns at each other simultaneously, and fired at point-blank range. The ten Savages did not go haywire like their more advanced comrades, but lost the capability to fight: on some machines sensors were gone, on others the power failed, and smoke could be seen rising from the gas turbine engines of some of them.

She heard the voices of the pilots. Panic. Curses. Angry shouts. Terrified screams. Wonderful... the Russian people's screams were delightful.

Sabina deactivated the ECS. The Eligor appeared before the enemies, basking in the orange glow of the early sunset. Her machine was pure white, that of a bride's wedding gown.

“Leonard” she whispered. She did not even engage the Lambda Driver. If he wished to see the world destroyed by the power of atom, then so it would become. But she would become his sword by her own strength. She would do all the things that girl could not. Her white Eligor took out a 37mm rifle from its back, and started sliding down the powdery slope.



◆ ◆ ◆

According to Kaname Chidori's memories, the vast underground cavern once served as the main maintenance dock for the *Tuatha de Danaan*. Right now all the ocean water had been drained, and the passage connecting it to the ocean had been blocked with reinforced concrete. In that gigantic space, enough to easily accommodate the 218-metre hull of the *de Danaan*, which was as large as a Shinjuku skyscraper laid down, was now proceeding the construction of something much more impressive than the facility at Yamsk 11. Thousands of cables and pipes of all dimensions ran towards a domed structure fifty-eight meters in diameter. The amount of energy that ran to that structure from generators several kilometers away was enough to power an entire city. Around the dome itself were large blocks of transformers, electricity storage units and the vital cooling system. Far from thinking about elegance, the space was used as practically as possible - after all, that was the world's largest Omni Sphere, that the project team called TARTAROS, for Telechrono Alternation Reactor Transfer and Response Omni Sphere. Curious, how the symbol of hope for the world had to bear the name of the deepest part of the mythological underworld, and its god.

She often liked to jokingly call it the “if-box”⁴. It was, in reality, strikingly similar, but there wasn't anyone there who would understand how true that joke was.

TAROS was a machine that all Lambda Driver-equipped ASes had. TARTAROS, however, had very little to do with its smaller cousins. It was built for a higher, noble purpose. Yes, noble... at least, that was what that Kaname was convinced of. Nobility, justice, friendship... and others. Oh, it was such a bliss, letting oneself float on these flowery words.

⁴ This is obviously a reference to Doraemon, the "moshimo-bokkusu".

“Just a little more”, she whispered, looking down at the dome, wrapped in twisting wires and cables, from the controller booth on the ceiling. It was almost complete, even though construction began little more than half a year ago. She was present on the site for two months already, and work had been proceeding very fast.

“Well-well, haven’t they been busy... to think that it’s finished so quickly.”

“They will work as you desire,” said Leonard, standing behind her. “However, because we had to hurry, the enemy had noticed the flow of components and parts.”

“Enemy?”

“My sister. Tessa and Sagara Sousuke, Mithril’s remnants - they are coming to this island.”

She thought that Leonard sometimes said the strangest things. Teresa Testarossa and Sagara Sousuke were both dead, and he spoke of them as though they were alive. She shot them herself, there could be no mistake.

“Tessa and Sousuke are long dead, what are you saying?”

“That is your impression, in fact-...”

Leonard paused in mid-sentence.

“...no, you are right. It was a misunderstanding from my part.”

“Sheesh, get a grip, will you,” laughed Kaname cheerfully, feeling as if she pointed out a silly blunder.

Why was she even able to laugh at that? That question did not cross her mind. Her broken mind and soul could not imagine just how wrong it was.

“In any case, the enemy will come, even though I sent Fowler and the others away to split their forces.”

“What, they’ll come before the activation?”

“Most probably, yes.”

“Then you know what to do, right?”

“Of course, I will stop them no matter what it takes. Now, shall we?” Leonard opened the door and motioned her to go first.

They left behind the underground dock, walked for some time, and came to an elevator, which took them back above ground. They walked out on to the storage terminal, a large plaza for reception of the different materials needed for construction, that was cut into the side of the mountain. The sky was full of stars.

The base defense force was lined up on the plaza, waiting for orders. Seeing her, the twelve Codarls, like an honor guard, stood at attention and lifted their monomolecular cutters towards the night sky. Behind those were three enormous shapes, illuminated in night time - the Behemoth ASes. They lifted their gigantic guns to their chests, saluting and expressing loyalty to their leader.

The first in the row of the Codarls stood Leonard’s personal AS, the Belial. With Leonard’s power, that AS did not have any limit to the use of its Lambda Driver, and could without question be called the most powerful in the world.

There was also a company of infantry and their transport helicopters, as well as the anti-air battalion. They all formed up and saluted Kaname and Leonard.

“All units have formed up and are waiting,” reported the commander, none other than Andrei Kalinin, who stepped forward to greet them. His olive-colored field uniform was perfectly clean, and, despite having just returned from a long trip to England, he did not show any signs of fatigue.

“Mister Kalinin, you know, you look better in this uniform than any suit.”

“Oh, I agree,” replied Kalinin without a trace of insincerity.

“Is this the entire garrison?” asked Kaname, and Kalinin glanced at the sea of heads that occupied the plaza.

“There are two platoons of Leviathans in the sea, on standby. Any fleet or vessel that tries to approach the island will at the very least sustain considerable damage.”

“Really...”

“Even if the landing is successful, the troops you see now will be prepared to meet the enemy anywhere.”

“And there is my Belial.”

“Hmm...”

It was not surprising that those were all the forces that Amalgam in its current state could muster. That said, if the detached force that was now in Afghanistan was there, the garrison would be considerably stronger...

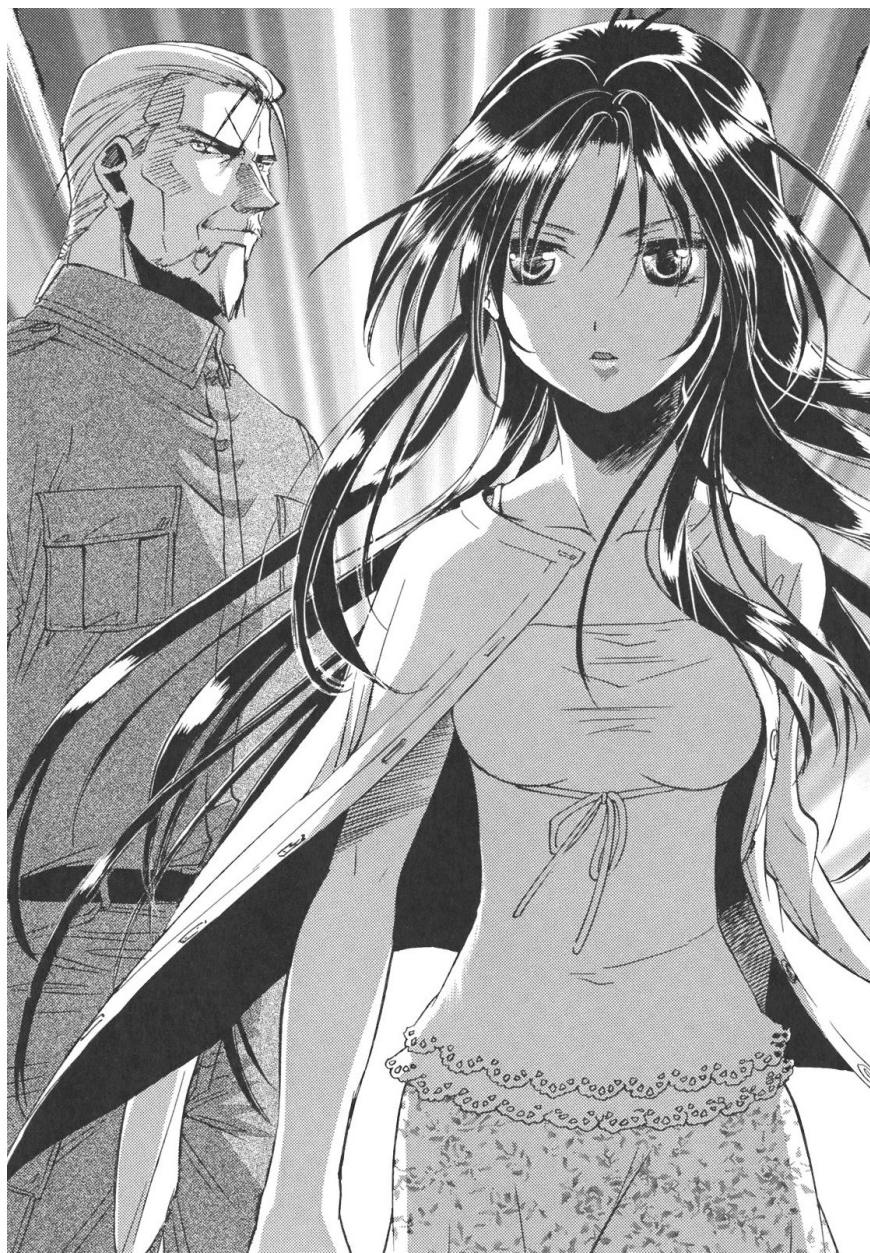
“We were spending all of our resources on TAROS, the expansion of the military force was secondary. There are other reasons...”

“Mithril, isn’t it?”

“Unfortunately, yes, or more precisely, its remnants. They became a real nuisance in this past half year. Either direct strikes by that ARX-8 machine, or guerrilla tactics, disruption of supply lines and manufacturing facilities. As you know well, special parts are needed for Lambda Driver-equipped AS types.”

Having read the written report, Kaname understood the overall situation. The remnants of Mithril continued to resist with exceptional stubbornness, patiently uncovering the secret plants of Amalgam and its related enterprises, and eliminating them diligently, one by one. They thought the organization would not be able to recover from the initial, devastating blow, but its remnants, on the contrary, became more elusive than ever. Especially the *Tuatha de Danaan*, that got away during the assault on Merida,

showed up several times, but then disappeared without a trace. And it was now both a symbol and a secret headquarters for the remaining people of Mithril.



“Even though Tessa’s gone, they managed to keep together... is it the influence of Mardukas-san, I wonder?”

Kalinin only frowned slightly, and exchanged looks with Leonard. The latter just shook his head almost imperceptibly, so that other subordinates wouldn’t notice.

“What? What is it?”

“No, nothing,” Kalinin quickly changed the subject. “As I was saying, the enemy cannot have a large force at his disposal, and to recover the missile base in Afghanistan, they have no choice but to divide their already small forces in two. And we still have superiority in political influence.”

“The US Navy, you mean?”

“Yes, even if it’s only a temporary nuisance to them. They have orders to sink the ‘Toy Box’ upon detection. There are probably a lot of officers in their ranks who doubt the order, but... well, at least they have the numbers to keep a large portion of the ocean in check.”

“Good!” Kaname clapped her hands together. “Well, once we get TARTAROS started up, even the weapons won’t be of any use. Leave it all to me, I’ll grant everyone’s wishes!”

Just protect me. After all, this fight is going to be easy.

Chapter 2: The Long Goodbye

The last resupply point of the *Tuatha de Danaan* was the container ship *Bernie Worell* that waited for them in a corner of the Philippine archipelago. Not so long ago, en route to Yamsk 11, Sousuke and the others resupplied on board that vessel, disguised as a merchant ship. From the seven thousand islands of the archipelago, their destination was an uninhabited island called Tagapul, where the *Bernie Worell* laid in wait for them.

The shallow and turbulent waters around the island made the resupply spot far from ideal, but avoiding detection by the US Navy and Amalgam, they had no other choice. The resupplying operation itself was dangerous for the people involved. Sousuke was helping with the loading operation as well, carefully checking the number of cases of 12.7mm ammunition, that was used in the AS' head-mounted machine guns.

“Sousuke!” he saw Mao calling out to him, a portable terminal under her arm. “When you’re finished there, these 76mm shells are waiting for you. You’re the one using them anyway, right?”

“On it.”

It was ammunition for the Oto Melara-made⁵ cannon, the Boxer 2, that fired 76mm shells - an unusually large caliber for an AS. The one he had previously used, the 56mm Boxer on the Arbalest, was known for its destructive strength, but the new version was even more powerful. However, if not used properly,

⁵ Oto Melara, an Italian corporation, produces many armaments for navies worldwide.

and especially in close distance combat, its powerful recoil could be problematic.

“But anyway, I don’t think you’ll need that many.”

Sousuke didn’t answer. He was now the only one using 76mm shells among his comrades, but in that resupply he was getting double the standard amount of ammo. Not so long ago there was another pilot who used the same type, and the logistics division had probably miscalculated.

“Kurz always used those...”

“Yeah, he did...”

“It looks like getting parts for M9’s was as difficult as expected.”

After they lost Kurz Weber and his M9 at Yamsk 11, only three functional AS remained on board the *de Danaan*: Sousuke’s Laevatein, Mao’s E-series M9, and Clouseau’s D-series M9. There was no backup, no reinforcements. The remaining forces that Mithril could muster were those three ASes. Even though the shortage of spare parts was noticeable, they had somehow managed to leave the stock of parts originally destined for Weber’s machine untouched, but as Lieutenant Sachs put it, “this was the end of it”. After the next fight, whatever the outcome, Mithril’s forces would suffer a substantial amount of damage. Even if they made it to the home base alive, their ASes wouldn’t be able to handle another sortie. The US Army was steadily deploying more and more M9’s, but the specific types that Mithril had would soon be obsolete and vanish from the production lines. Originally their most elite team had the most advanced machines, that were distinctly more powerful than ordinary types, but that was coming to an end. It was the irreversible pace of progress, but to Mao, who worked with those machines from the times of the XM-9 prototype, it was a bit sad.

She sighed, and sat on a small box near Sousuke.

“Listen... are you really going?”

“Hm?”

“To Merida. Alone with Tessa. You know it’s suicide.”

Her voice was completely different from the time in the briefing room. He could only feel deep anxiety... and confusion. She was extremely worried both about Tessa and himself.

“If you said you were going to Afghanistan, then she might give up Merida...”

“Hm, I don’t know about that,” said Sousuke closing the lid of an ammunition case as he finished his check. “I think she’d even go alone. She has reason enough to do that.”

“Pfh, reason. That TAROS thing and changing history. She’s going to die for that ridiculous theory?”

“Ridiculous theory, you say...”

Yes, it did look like that. Even to him, who happened to witness some incidents that looked supernatural, the supposed plan of Leonard and his organization seemed unlikely, to say the least.

Even though there was some suspicious activity on Merida, wasn’t it logical to give priority to a nuclear missile base?

According to the latest intelligence, there may be two enemy machines with Lambda Drivers waiting for them there, and new models, more powerful than the Codarls. No matter how used his comrades were to fighting such enemies, that fight was definitely going to be one of the hardest, and if Sousuke and the Laevatein were with them, their chances would go up considerably. Not only would the Laevatein fight at least on equal terms with the enemy machines, he had also been a guerrilla in Badakhshan years before, and knew the area like his proverbial backyard. He would be able to operate without a map, he knew the secret passages, the weather

of the season, and could even enlist the help of local residents (if any remained), in case that was needed.

Of course, Andrei Kalinin knew it as well. He fought against and with him on that soil, but why then did he choose that particular spot? Was it the land of fate for him? Was he saying: “Here will be our next battle. I am waiting”?

Sousuke didn’t think so. He was simply not the kind of man who would allow himself to get that sentimental. From a purely pragmatic point of view, Kalinin was trying to lead the greatest menace to him - the Laevatein and its pilot - down the “easy road”.

Yes... Afghanistan was the easy road. Merida was the road of hardships, where the main enemy force lied in wait. An operation, based on a reasonable assumptions and clear tactics, against a suicidal mission based on something that was out of this world. Which one would an ordinary soldier choose? And which one would the enemy protect at all costs? The missile base or Merida?

Thinking it through, there could be only one conclusion. Tessa was right. The enemy was concentrated at Merida, and the fact that they were unable to confirm the presence of Belial on the missile base only supported that. Leonard was on Merida Island.

Even so, they could not leave the missile base alone. They could be serious about shooting the missile. In that case...

“Yes, no mistake,” sighed Sousuke.

“Huh, what’s that about?”

“Tessa. I have to follow her, there’s no other way. Leaving aside all the talk about changing history - think about where the enemy commander would be.”

“Hm, yes...”

Mao was not a fool herself, and could guess where Sousuke's thoughts were heading. She continued in a sullen voice, as if talking to herself:

“Yeah, probably... though it might be just wishful thinking...”

“Consider that the enemy also has no more safety margin. It's like in that old saying ‘when it's hard for us, it's hard for the enemy’. Mao... don't make her raise the white flag.”

“But...”

Her voice sounded like she wanted to say a lot more, to protest to the last. The old Sousuke would probably think her hard to understand, but now he was different. It was hard for her, and deep anxiety was eating at her heart. And because he was someone she trusted, she probably wanted him to hear her out. Somehow, he understood her feelings. What was he supposed to do in that case?

“Well, if you're still worried, let me give you a hug.”

“...huh?”

“Let's do a fun little warm-up together, and get to work later, eh?” Sousuke blurted out an expression that he memorized from god knows where, and closely looked at Mao's face to see her reaction.

Mao was speechless, looking at him with eyes wide open.

“... what was that?”

“That... I mean...”

Sousuke's face showed that he clearly felt just how awkward the situation had become. It was just like writing an answer that he was absolutely sure of on the blackboard, and getting it completely wrong.

“I thought you'd hit me.”

“Huh..?”

“If I said something like that, you’d hit and try to strangle me... and then become cheerful as always...”

“Ah...”

They finally understood each other, and Mao smiled wryly.

“Sousuke... you just can’t replace him.”

“It seems so. Sorry.”

“You silly...”

Sousuke hung his head, but Mao gently took his face in her hands. The warmth in her chest and the cold on her fingertips... for some reason, it was a very nostalgic sensation.

The maintenance crew people, working close by, were glancing at them from time to time, but Mao did not care about public attention, and whispered to Sousuke:

“You remember... some time ago... what I said on the way back from that operation in Sicily? The one where we caught that Bruno fellow?”

Sousuke looked puzzled.

“To think about what you’re going to do in life?”

“Ah, that. Yes, you did say it.”

“I then made a face like ‘I’m saying this for your own sake, think about it’. It wasn’t like that, really... I was just pissed off at you. For always putting yourself last. And everybody else first - your friends, your duty, whatever. But it was just your way of keeping your composure. Nobody was expecting you to do all those crazy things. But it was the same as not trusting anyone completely... You didn’t even understand that I was just a woman.”

Sousuke remained silent.

“But now it looks like you have. You’re a very kind person, you know. Someone like you shouldn’t even have become a soldier.”

“Me..? You’re making too much of it.”

“No. You just learned skills necessary for survival. You shouldn’t have ever had to hold a gun, or... learn to pilot that robot. We’re here by choice, and you’re not,” Mao’s voice shook slightly and she paused. “Look... I’d like to ask you something.”

“Yes...”

“Please. When this is over, stop it. Don’t do it anymore. Forget about good-for-nothings like us, just live for yourself. Don’t ever take up a gun again. Be kind to people, laugh with them, like a normal boy...”

He heard a sniffle, and felt her hugging him even more tightly.

“You can live like that, I know it...”

“Impossible.”

“Don’t say that. Don’t say things that make Kaname sad...”

“Kaname...”

“If you have someone you love, and that person tells you that everything’s fine, then it’ll somehow be fine. It’s usually like that...”

Sousuke couldn’t think of anything to say. It could really be like that. If she was there, then he probably wouldn’t be feeling that way, and would believe her if she said that everything was all right. But then, who would say that to Mao?

“Oh, I’m fine. I’m just a shameless woman,” she pushed him away lightly and laughed.



After finishing the ammunition supplies check, Sousuke helped sort the correspondence addressed to the crew. Some personal items arriving through fake home addresses: letters from family, some food and drink they had asked their friends to send

them, documents from lawyers and tax counsellors, articles from mail order shops. Though they had arrived in under two days by FedEx, after that the resupply was postponed, and some post had been waiting for half a year.

While sorting the mail, Sousuke was thinking over his discussion with Mao earlier. It had somehow brought a feeling of vague uneasiness. She was psychologically weakened. Letting her go to Afghanistan like that could be dangerous. No matter the chances, the enemy AS were elite specialists in LD-equipped machines. It would be the one battle in her entire career that would require the utmost precision and skill. There would not be time for the slightest moment of hesitation, and the odds were very close. And he did not feel from her that resolve - to kick down the enemy and rip out his throat, if need be. Should he be going to Afghanistan himself? Would letting her go be equal to leaving her to die..?

“But Chidori...”

That was probably the last chance to get her back. If he didn't it would be the end for them. It was not a vague premonition, he felt it very strongly - he had to go to Merida right now, and as fast as possible.

He wished he had two bodies right now, and two machines. The enemy's tactic of dividing them was clever indeed, striking at the psychological state of his comrades, too.

“Shit...”

He cursed under his breath, and shook his head. *Do not think any more, just continue your job.* There wasn't much time left...

“Sousuke,” called Michel Lemon, who had just come in. He was the former French intelligence agent he had met in Namsak. “Lemon.”

“For you,” he continued without a greeting, even though they hadn’t seen each other for a month, and held an envelope out to him.

Lemon wasn’t getting on board the *de Danaan* after that - his leg was injured in Moscow, and without even having time to rest properly, he was running all across the world for Mithril, and had somehow managed to get there in time to board the *Bernie Worell*.

“It’s from Sarah. She told me to hand it to you personally.”

“Sarah... Sarah Miller you mean?”

She could have easily contacted him by email, so why bother sending a personal letter? He opened the envelope doubtfully, and caught a small memory chip that almost fell out. It was one of those common memory cards that could be used in phones or digital cameras. Slipping the memory card into his pocket casually, Sousuke started reading her small, rounded handwriting.

Dear Sagara-san,

I hope you are doing well. Please allow me to thank you again for your help in Siberia. The last time we were on board, I wanted to talk to you at length, but there was simply not enough time, for which I profoundly apologize.

I am writing this letter in a house overlooking an old park. It is a quite desolate sight in winter, but Mr. Hunter assures me that in spring the anemones are quite beautiful (though I am not sure “this” me will get to see them).

I am continuing to exchange e-mails with your superior officer Teletha Testarossa-san. She did not write me any tactical details (for security reasons, I’m sure), but there were some

important things she told me. The reason why people like myself, Tessa-san and Kaname Chidori-san (I'm sorry, I don't know the kanji for her name...) were born. I have a premonition... or a sort of vague conviction, that you are about to engage in very intense fighting. I don't know how it will turn out, but I feel it has to do with our problems - no, this world's problems, and it is a major critical point, what is called the "nick of time". Tessa-san did not let me know what she was planning, possibly because she felt I would be opposed to it. Yes, definitely because I would agree more with the way her brother, Leonard, does things. My memories of that research facility in Siberia continue to cause me occasional bouts of panic. These wounds will probably not be healed in this life. Moreover, I understand how absurd this world has become, and if a big war comes, it's only going to get worse.

I think that if this world can really be restored to what it was meant to be, then it has to be done. But I will not interfere with Tessa-san in any way.

She, as I, is torn between our beliefs. I'll leave the decision of helping or stopping her to you, Sagara-san. You are the one I owe my life to, and thus my heart is yours (please do not misunderstand... though if you asked me to, I would do anything, but then Tessa-san or Chidori-san would probably kill me, so I will abstain. Oh, but I completely forgot what I was writing about (*sweatdrop*). I will wait until my head has cooled down a little).

I'm sorry, I will now continue.

Since I don't use a pen much nowadays, my fingers get tired quickly. I should have just written everything in English from the start... Lemon-san just came into the room, and as he's supposed to be going to visit you soon, I will leave this letter with him.

Because this might be the last chance for me, please allow me to say it again: thank you, from my heart. I will pray for your good fortune, Sagara-san.

Yours sincerely,
Sarah Miller

P.S.: If you have time, please feel free to look through the files on the memory card. These are some things I've found on the net.

“So, what did she write?”

Lemon was unceremoniously peeking from behind his shoulder. It didn't look like he could read Japanese.

“It's complicated. How should I put it...”

There were a lot of strong feelings, doubt, pressure and inner conflict mixed in that letter, and he couldn't even start to collect his own thoughts.

Corresponding with Sarah Miller... what did she write to Tessa-san about? Were her thoughts sincere? A crossroads of fate - then why trust him? But the facts seemed coherent enough.

And what about the memory card - was that all there really was to it? And how much should he tell to Lemon about that delicate situation? Could he dismiss the possibility that Lemon already knew the contents of the letter?

“Hey, you're making an awfully troubled face, what is it?”

“I'm always making that kind of face.”

“Heh... well, it doesn't look like it's a love letter, anyway. Though when she gave it to me, she did look a little like a girl asking someone to deliver a love letter for her...”

“What are you talking about...”

“Hey, I know you’re a tough guy and all, but damn, seeing your popularity makes me lose confidence in myself. And they always told me I’m handsome...”

Lemon tried to make it sound like he was jealous, but Sousuke was mostly ignoring him. Sarah was opposed to whatever Tessa was planning to do, supporting Leonard’s idea of “rewriting” the current world back to its natural state. And she briefly stated the reasons why she thought it was sensible.

Sousuke himself was still hesitating.

His brief dialogue with Leonard in the underground ruins of Yamsk 11 never left his mind. If his claims were true, who in the world could deny that his idea was right? Not only Sarah, anyone who got hurt in all of the wars that happened would say the same thing. Sousuke’s thoughts were getting more bitter by the minute. That things should have been better - no, he could not deny it. Some things he would have changed...

“Lemon... what if Nami...”

“Huh?”

“No... nothing, forget about it.”

There was nothing to be gained from asking other people. Even if he heard Lemon’s opinion on which was better, it would not make the worm of doubt inside him disappear. His choice was not between black or white, but shades of gray. There was not a right one, and both had unpleasant connotations. If he talked about it with anyone...

“Hey, look, if you want to talk, I’m here.”

“No, it’s nothing. Sorry.”

“Hmm, right. Well, I’m off then. Have to give a brief report to Testarossa-san,” said Lemon, stood up and stretched a little. Even though he realized there was something on his comrade’s

mind, he didn't pursue the matter further. "Sousuke... take care, you hear?"

"Yeah..."

He told himself that it wasn't certain yet that this would be the last time. He simply waved lightly in goodbye, and looked at the figure of his friend, leisurely strolling towards the door that led to the temporary bridge between ships, and disappearing behind it.



Clouseau went out on the ship's deck in the middle of the loading operation, though for different reasons than the Frenchman. He had heard that Teletha Testarossa was having a final briefing, and was heading to her quarters.

"Hello, Monsieur Clouseau," said Lemon.

"Mmm," he only nodded and passed him by.

His family name was, of course, of French origin, but he felt uncomfortable being called "monsieur". One of his ancestors, from a tribe of fierce warriors of North Africa, as was told in the family, was a slave in Quebec. His unusual first name, "Belfangan", came from a brave warrior, and according to his grandfather was handed down through generations. Apparently that old Belfangan killed a devil that was tormenting the people, at the cost of his own life, then turned into a black hawk and ascended to the heavens.

He made the military valor part come true. The modern Belfangan entered the army, survived many ordeals, and became a superior soldier, while remaining modest. Of course, the name "Belfangan" was quite hard to pronounce, and he always told the new people to call him "Ben".

He was called by the Lieutenant in charge of resupplying, who was now on the ship's deck, controlling the operation.

“The loading of the crew’s personal effects is getting a bit delayed... can we get more time?”

“No, I’m afraid not. If you don’t make it in time, you leave it - please let the crew know.”

Tessa ordered the crew leaving the *de Danaan* to embark all of their personal belongings with them, to clear out, so to speak. The order was given only a few hours ago, and the crew was now in chaos.

“Shit... what the hell is wrong, what’s the Captain thinking?”

“Look, we’re all thinking that, but don’t say it before the men,” he clapped the Lieutenant on the back cheerfully, as if trying to restore his own confidence.

He felt like cursing the heavens himself, but if there was one thing he could not do, it was changing the Captain’s mind. He was informed by Mardukas to obey, and he did exactly that.

“Lieutenant,” called Sousuke, who was sitting somewhat further away from the work area. He was about to finish his bookkeeping duty.

“Ah, Sagara. How’s Laevatein’s maintenance?”

“Al and Sachs are on it right now.”

“Hmm.”

“Your mail, sir.”

He handed him a cardboard box with the mail order shop’s logo, and a few stickers of mail companies. It was a five-month-old order that finally reached its destination after being forwarded time and again from the fake address. Clouseau himself had already forgotten he ordered it.

“Movies, are they?”

“Hm... aah,” Clouseau nodded vaguely.

Those were DVDs of a masterpiece of anime, about ten years old... yes, it was a movie, he didn't lie.

Sousuke's gaze was fixed on him. He was impassive as always, and nothing could be read from his face. It didn't seem like the contents of the DVD would be of any interest to him, anyway.

“What is it?”

“No, nothing,” Sousuke said hesitantly.

Finally Clouseau could spot something like hesitation on his face.

“Have you talked to Mao?”

“About work and other related things... but I know what you're trying to say.”

He was probably worried about her. Ever since they lost Kurz Weber, she was fading away, slowly but surely. It was not like she was trying to drown her sorrows in alcohol, drinking in secret, no - but working with her, one could not help but notice the subtle changes.

“I don't think you can do anything, and it's not necessary. We're not that weak, both of us. At least, compared to you, eh.”

Sousuke only shrugged at the provocation.

“You planning to get back to pouting, like that time before Hong Kong?”

“Not at all, sir.”

“Then you're just tired.”

“Me..?”

“Your heart is tired. Tired of all the fighting. That's why you're thinking of Mao along the same lines, no?”

Sousuke did not answer, and looked down pensively, as if trying to recall things. After a while he looked up at Clouseau with a curious expression.

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m the same,” Clouseau laughed.

Yes, he was tired, too. He had acted as a replacement for Andrei Kalinin for close to a year, and it showed. Not only him, but the rest of the crew was pretty much in the same condition.

“But, well, when we take care of this little business, I plan on taking a lo-on-g leave. I’ll return home and just lay around like a lazy arse. And then I’ll go on some sightseeing trip. Japan would be good... Akihabara, for instance...”

“That is wonderful, but... why Akihabara?”

“Well, I’ve already been to Mecca, so Akiba is next.”

“I... see...”

Sousuke clearly missed Clouseau’s joke completely.

“Anyway, think about yourself first. Leave Mao to me,” Clouseau clapped him on the back, and left.

He then found private Falkowski, who was busy managing the loading of the crew’s personal effects. The poor man had enlisted in the supply battalion just a month before the attack on Merida, and since then had been living on board the *de Danaan*. He was a timid person, but capable at managing supplies, and in the last months even that required some courage - he got used to firmly saying “No” to different battalions’ requests.

“Hey, look, I’m sorry about this, but I wanted to add this to my personal luggage.”

“Yes, Lieutenant.”

Clouseau held out the box, and was about to give it to the private. After all, he would be always busy after that, and there would be no time to enjoy it. It would be better to leave it with the other things and watch it properly later. No, wait - there was time to enjoy it on the way to Afghanistan, if he took a laptop with him. And after all, it was the movie that, when shown in North America, was a victim of such horrendous editing, that it became famous in

itself. And, shameful as it is, he himself only saw the horrible dub...⁶



⁶ It's safe to say they're talking about Nausicaä.

“Err... Lieutenant..?”

Clouseau came back to earth. He was still grasping tight the box that he was about to hand over to the private, who seemed very confused. Clouseau somehow felt as if he was clutching to his lifeline.

“Ah, er...”

He couldn't explain his sudden maniacal urge to not let go of that box. It was as if a voice was telling him, “don't let it go, watch it while you have the time, now”.

“Sorry,” suppressing the premonition, he let go of the box.

“Is... everything all right, sir?”

“Yes. Take care of it.”

He turned on his heels, and quickly left the deck.



Commander Richard Mardukas also received a letter, delivered to him by the duty officer. It was from his ex-wife. The stamp showed that the posting date was approximately two months ago. There were still some questions about property, legal matters and all kind of small things to be settled, but why did she have to write about it now? At first he grumbled to himself, “What is it now? New trouble?”

“Something wrong, Mardukas-san?” said Tessa.

She was holding the map of the ocean - they were in the ship's main briefing room, discussing the finer details of both operations, and the duty officer brought the letter directly to him.

“No... just a personal letter.”

“Ah, I see.”

“I’m sorry, Captain. Let us continue,” he said, pulling the heap of documents towards himself, evidently ready to resume the meeting.

“No, it’s all right, let’s take a break,” Tessa said lightly. She folded the map and sat on a nearby chair.

The duty officer had already left, and they were alone - the Captain and her executive officer. The other staff members that were normally around the briefing room were busy with their personal effects. Mardukas and most of the crew of the submarine would not fight in Afghanistan - they would settle things after getting off the ship, and then go their separate ways. It was a sad end to their life together, but properly speaking they would only get in the way of the land units during battle.

Mardukas was probably the only person who still did not express his opinion about Tessa’s lone mission to Merida. For once, he could not get his own thoughts in order, and did not know how to start talking about it. And even though they were alone in the room, Tessa didn’t look like she wanted to talk.

Mardukas was thinking hard about what he should say to her. To a boring person like himself, this silence was very uncomfortable.

“It’s from my ex-wife.”

“I’m sorry..?”

“The letter. You know that I have a long history with this divorce?”

“I heard something. Actually, read about it long ago in your personnel file,” Tessa sounded a little surprised to hear him talking about his personal history, possibly for the first time.

“I haven’t met her for more than five years now...”

He had divorced his wife, Paula, when he was still in the Navy, some time before joining Mithril, and had since met her

several times in court. He mostly left the running of the affair to his lawyer, and because they had no children, there was no reason to meet.

“Aren’t you going to read it?”

“Later is fine. It is probably nothing important, anyway.”

“Hm... what kind of person is she? Your ex-wife, I mean.”

“An ordinary woman. The waitress in a pub near the base in Plymouth. Was popular with the regulars... the girl that drew customers to the shop, so to speak.”

“Oh, she must be quite pretty then.”

“She was... but I already threw away the picture. I only remember her as very obliging, and too talkative.”

He fiddled around with the unopened letter, trying to remember Paula’s face when she was young, but somehow couldn’t.

“Normally the officers would come in for a drink with their friends, but I always came alone, and sat there, reading books on engineering. I must have seemed something out of the ordinary. She would sometimes talk to me, and I would answer vaguely... and about a year later, we married for some reason.”

“‘For some reason’..? Didn’t you fall in love?”

“I don’t remember that myself... please do not misunderstand, I’m not particularly embarrassed about it,” added Mardukas, after seeing the doubt in Tessa’s eyes. “Forgive me for speaking presumptuously, but you are still young. There was no passion or romance, it is something that happens to a lot of people in this world.”

“Really? But that’s so boring...”

“That is exactly why love dramas sell so well. An ordinary couple is nothing bad in itself. My work, however, was particular...”

“Ah...”

Tessa could quickly imagine what happened later, and nodded, with a serious look on her face. Life was not easy for the wives of military personnel, and even less so for those who had the misfortune to be married to a submariner. Transfer after transfer, the husband being away from home for months on end, and couldn't even let her know he was coming, because his work was always a well-kept secret.

“Paula was an ordinary woman, and this divorce was just a matter of time.”

He thought that Tessa’s parents somehow managed to overcome it, but didn’t say it out loud. It would be obviously offensive to say that he was jealous of them, - they did, after all, suffer a much more cruel fate than simple divorce.

“It’s a pity...”

“No, I would say that it is as it should be. We aren’t wasting each other’s lives, trying to pretend to have a normal married life.”

“Maybe, but it’s a bit lonesome, isn’t it,” smiled Tessa sadly, and turned towards the table, as if wanting to get back to work.

She glanced at the final checklist and crossed out several points.

“Well, we should already be--”

“Captain.”

“Huh?”

Mardukas was looking at her sharply. She was worn out by constant worry, and did not look like an eighteen-year-old girl.

“If you use the TAROS in the Red Chapel, it’s true that it could be possible to operate the ship alone. It *could* be possible. You would not be able to substitute the skill of trained sonar operators and weapons officers. And... you need an annoying,

nagging XO, like me. Before you make your decision, you need to see the situation from a different angle.”

“Yes, but---”

“Furthermore, there are not less than twenty-four hours of sailing until Merida, and you will not be able to get any rest until then. No food, no sleep. This is simply unrealistic. It is not a question of willpower,” Mardukas told her all that in one breath.

Tessa was silent. On her troubled face shadows passed, as if she remembered other times when someone talked back to her. Of course, she knew that he was absolutely right, but she chose this path anyway. She already told everyone the reason during the briefing.

“I am still skeptical about all this talk of parallel worlds and a ‘nick of time’. I don’t have the confidence to lead my subordinates to believe in it, either.”

“Exactly, and that’s why I---”

“You’re satisfied with playing democracy?”

“...What?”

“Even if it’s an operation with unfair odds, if you think it is right, you will lead your men to hell and back - that is the role of a commander. You came this far, and you start thinking ‘I’m not going to commit suicide with everyone, so I’ll go by myself’..? No wonder Mao was so angry.”

“And you think the same..?”

“Yes.”

Holding yourself back and letting your subordinates choose was not the right way to command. It did not matter whether the decision was just or not. One just had to say, “do it”. That was the one thing a commander could never, ever lose sight of. She really wanted to avoid things getting ugly at all costs. Too idealistic...

“Captain. What if I said right now that I would relieve you from duty? If I obtain the approval of three senior officers, it could happen.”

“That is not funny.”

“If that happened, would you be able to shoot me? Could you kill me, to be able to exercise your right to command?”

“That...”

After a long and tense silence, she said in a voice stifled by emotion:

“...no. Probably not.”

“And that is your limit. I served under you for three years, and at the end, I have to say - regrettably, you do not have the nature of a true commander.”

Those were his true thoughts - she realized that even though his words were harsh, she did not bear any ill will towards him. No, on the contrary, she felt like a pupil being praised.

“Otherwise,” Tessa mumbled, folding together the sea charts, “otherwise... we’ll leave it like this?”

“I thought you had already understood. Order me, Captain. Order your crew.”

To commit suicide together with her; to follow her on a one-way trip. It would be easy for him to say now: “I won’t let you go with Sagara alone”, and appear like a knight in shining armor. But now that would be unacceptable. This time she had to choose, even if he understood fully how cruel it was to her.

“It isn’t too different from making me shoot you...”

“Yes, that option would be easier.”

“Let me... let me think for a bit. Alone. Please.”

“Of course.”

Mardukas left the briefing room, and started waiting for her call in the dark passageway.

What would the crew - no, what would her father think of how awfully he had treated her? Would she run off to hide somewhere, blaming him for the fact that she had not been able to live a normal life..? But there was no place in this world for her to hide in. The safest place was in the womb of this monster, that she herself created. No enemy could ever reach her in the briefing room of the *Tuatha de Danaan*. But rather than being protected by other people and spending her days afraid of the slightest shadow, didn't she make the *de Danaan*'s rage into her own weapon..?

Those were the thoughts of her executive officer.

She knew how hard the road would be, and went along. She was nearing exhaustion, and her limit was already close. Up until now, though, she had followed her own course on the stormy seas of fate, and so shall it be, to the last.

On the other side of the door, the briefing room was completely silent. There was no indication that she might call for him soon, so he thought that there was still time, and finally opened the letter that he had been holding.

It was a brief note from Paula about the current state of their divorce procedure - the agency that took the matter into their hands seemed to be making some progress. Not so long ago, the owner of the pub where they had met fell seriously ill, and though he had recovered, it looked like his pub closed. She went to the closing party, and met some people she hadn't seen for a while. During the party, the conversation somehow shifted to Richard Mardukas, and it sounded like the people who knew the real circumstances behind his leaving the Navy sympathised with him. One of them, who apparently had a conflict with Mardukas when they were classmates at the academy, talked to her a lot. He said that Mardukas was a very honest man, and precisely because of that he exposed the unpleasant truth, which the politicians and big

shots in the military would not allow. He told her that, when he was young, he couldn't forgive him for that attitude - and that she did the same, not listening to him. But everyone was an adult now, and they should try again, he said. That was why she wrote him the letter.

They weren't on bad terms, so wouldn't it be good to go out to eat somewhere together once in a while? She wanted him to contact her, when he felt like it.

A photograph was enclosed in the letter. She was in a park, with four other women that looked like typical housewives. Paula hadn't changed at all from the old days - no, she looked even more lovely now, after a long separation. What was that feeling all of a sudden..? Thinking that it would be nice to meet her again, he became a little surprised with himself.

Why not, though. If everything there ended well, he might go visit Plymouth again. He planned to rest, anyway.

He was busy thinking about the contents of his reply, but then a noise made him turn his head. The door of the briefing room opened.

“Mardukas-san.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Tessa looked even more exhausted. Her pretty eyes, now red, were a testimony of the torment she was going through.

She handed him the copy of a document. It was a list comprising around twenty-five names of crew members.

“This is the bare minimum. Get them to assemble in the briefing room right now, please.”

There was no need to draw things out any longer. No apologies, or comforting words. Just one sentence that they had heard a thousand times before “you got your orders, now get to it”. Nothing else.

“Aye-aye, Ma’am.”

Mardukas saluted, and left the room.



The resupply operation was already nearing its end, but Laevatein’s maintenance seemed to be far from completion.

“Ah screw this..!”

Ed Sachs, the Lieutenant in charge of the maintenance crew, cursed and threw down his wrench - it landed on the flight deck with a loud clang. In all that time they hadn’t even finished with the main frame of the machine. It was possible to get the machine to a condition more or less suited for fighting. The problem was installing the rapid deployment booster. The Laevatein was, fundamentally, a machine derived from the M9. Equipment and parts for the M9 could mostly be used, but the XL-2 rapid deployment booster - basically a single-use liquid fuel rocket used for assault landings, after the machine had been ejected from the submarine’s catapult - was no good.

Fully equipped, with the Lambda Driver cancellation device “fairy’s feather”, and the 165mm demolition gun, the machine was simply too heavy to fly. The thrust was insufficient, and the wing loading was extreme⁷. There was no way to ensure proper shoulder and back clearance, and on top of that, the sensor system needed to operate in flight was not installed on the Laevatein. Simply put, even if the submarine got close enough to the island, the machine would not be able to disembark quickly.

⁷ "In aerodynamics, wing loading is the loaded weight of the aircraft divided by the area of the wing." (thanks, Wiki, couldn't have put it better myself - simply it means that his wings will carry an inordinate amount of weight, which is not hard to guess by looking at the ARX-8 drawing... wait, it was designed to fly?!)

So they had to use the XL-3. It was not an official name - simply two XL-2 units hurriedly put together, an improvised piece of equipment that theoretically could carry the weight of the Laevatein. Because they had been expecting that sort of situation, they were trying to get it working for the last two months, and had barely finished in time.

No, properly speaking, they hadn't. The equipment itself was ready, but they had a hard time attuning it to the machine. For some unknown reason conflicts and bugs sprang up between the XL-3's flight control and Laevatein's motion management systems. Besides that, there were many parts they were having trouble with. It was not something that could be solved within several hours.

Al could not remain impassive at the sight.

<Lieutenant. If you could just attach the unit itself, that would be fine. I will try to run calibration tests on my own.>

"No, wouldn't work. The problem's not only in the software. To find the reason we'd have to change circuit boards and some other parts, bypassing all the wiring and hydraulics... even if you tried, it won't just fix itself."

<You're quite right.>

"Just stay quiet, like a good machine, would you?"

<A machine?>

"What? You don't like something?"

<No. Please allow me to pose you a question, though.>

"Go on."

<Can you imagine what it would be like to grow wings from the back of your body?>

It was, unquestionably, a strange thing to ask.

"Eh, what are you on about?"

<Can you?>

"Well... as a kid, I guess I imagined that a lot."

<Would you say that it is part of the process of growing up of a human?>

“Can’t say for everyone, but isn’t this kinda dream normal, anyway?”

<It is just a hypothesis, but what if the problem is not in the XL-3, but in me.>

“What do you mean?”

<Feeling my own body. The motion management system is still, so to speak, a subordinate of the core unit that is “I”. However, now its data bus has to handle much larger amounts of data.>

The motion management system was a unit integrated into the AS frame. If one compared AI to the brain, then that would be the cerebellum.

“Yeah... I remember noticing something like that,” muttered Sachs, going through the logs again.

The amount of data transferred was indeed higher compared to a regular M9. One could say that there was a lot of mostly useless data exchange going on.

“So what you’re trying to say is, you became accustomed to Laevatein as your own body?”

<I would think so. If one supposed that I was in the process of gaining “self-awareness”, then suddenly growing wings would provoke an unknown reaction.>

“Well... it sounds a bit crazy...”

<From a design point of view, even with the XL-3 on board, the data bus would be loaded to well below maximum tolerance levels. However, if we examine the hypothesis of this “feeling of my own body”, there is a possibility that the bus width is simply not sufficient.>

“Hmm...”

<Would it be possible to perform an extension now?>

“I can’t say it’s impossible, but according to tests it’s sufficient. And no bugs found, either.”

<That would be right, if I was a machine...>

“... I see. I get what you’re trying to say.”

Not to look at him as just another machine - that was the idea. And either way, this AI fellow, whose core was essentially made of liquid metal, and the Lambda Driver, that was his extension, were really things beyond anyone’s imagination. At first glance the plan to increase bus width looked liked nonsense, but it could be in fact an unexpected solution. If the bus width was increased, wouldn’t it all become strangely similar to human brain tissue? And it wasn’t easy work, either. They would also need to shut down AI completely at least once.

“Well, let’s try that... is what’d I’d like to say, but we’re out of time.”

<I understand.>

“Let’s give up on this and throw out the XL-3. You’ll have to walk underwater.”

<It is a pity.>

With that, the probability of their operation being successful dropped even lower. They would have to disembark and wade through an island full of mines, both on land and sea. Lambda Driver or not, it would be tough to survive all that. And yet...

Unpleasant thoughts crossed his mind. *Just forget about it, Ed, - you were going to get on that ship and go to Florida with Norah.* Kids also waited for them, and it was ages since he last ate Mum’s meat pie. He would at least finish his work on that machine--...

“Sachs!”

Someone called him from the other side of the ship deck - it was Mardukas, who was waving to him to come closer.

“What is it?”

“You’re staying. Captain’s orders.”

When he heard that, Sachs felt strangely relieved. He stopped the disassembly. Now he had no choice but to see it through to the end.



At last, the status of all tasks on the portable terminal screen changed to “Completed”. The heads of various departments were coming in with final reports. The resupply operation was fully completed.

“Wonderful,” nodded Tessa, and notified the crew to gather on the hangar deck.

All of them - the maintenance crews and supply ship’s personnel, soldiers going to Afghanistan - were coming to listen to her final words.

Her last speech...

She was walking towards the hangar, and her steps were heavy. She noticed small scratches in the narrow corridor. Some pipes, painted cream, were now completely black. The ship had been at sea for only two and a half years, but it looked like it had served for much longer.

Those were a busy couple of years. She felt like the day of the ship’s maiden voyage, when she first ordered full start-up of her systems from the Captain’s seat for the first time, was something that happened long, long ago. And her young, fifteen-year-old self, ambitious, full of confidence, sincerely believing that she would be able to defeat any enemy and overcome any distress.

How did things become like this... Her reward for overcoming all those trials was - disaster after disaster, constant fatigue, loss of faith in herself, despair that was eating away at her every waking moment...

“If this continues, I’ll...”

No. She has to get a hold of herself.

She entered the hangar and saw all the two hundred crew lined up in the middle. All familiar faces, and she could see Mao and Clouseau in the front row.

All of their faces were stiff, and she could feel the barely concealed feeling of uneasiness.

“Atte-e-en-tion!”

At Mardukas' command all of them stood at attention. Tessa briskly walked past the front row, towards the improvised podium, that was in fact a small container with a ramp. Once she stood up there, she had to find the courage to give those men a speech.

Get a hold of yourself. Straighten your back. Pull up your chin. Do not let your eyes wander around. You have got to show them that you are in good spirits, make them think that you are absolutely confident in yourself. That everything is going as planned, and victory is near.

I'm a leader, my strength and wisdom is unquestionable. I overcame every obstacle that has been in my way. I'm “Mithril's witch”.

Do not let them see a chink in your armor. Flattery is useless, - just stand on the podium, and look down on them with a commanding air.

On them, who know perfectly well what kind of person I really am...

And she went up the ramp.

“Oh..!”

She felt that she was suddenly losing her balance.



She made desperate attempts to recover it, but they were all wrong, wrong..! and Tessa executed a perfect pancake landing onto the podium with a sound that Kaname Chidori always parodied so accurately...

The echo of her fall resonated in the completely still hangar deck.

Silence.

Dreadful silence.

None of the crew dared to move. They were still standing at attention as ordered.

God knows how many long, agonizing seconds passed, until Mardukas' voice broke the paralyzing stillness.

“... Captain..?”

“I... I’m fine!” she gasped.

Thoughts of how to get out of that situation were swirling in her head with tremendous speed. She descended into a complete panic.

What now..? I really did it this time... why did it have to happen now... It’s supposed to be my last speech..! This is the first time I fell in these circumstances. I was always careful before... and I had to let my guard down at this moment. And why was the ramp so unstable? Yes, it was definitely the ramp’s fault. Have to punish it right now... wait, what am I thinking. Calm down, calm down. I must quickly get up and act in a dignified manner, not showing any agitation at all. Calmly, make a face like I did it on purpose... wait, why would someone fall on purpose? No, no, that’s not it. I need an excuse, anything... can’t say it was all because of the podium... Quickly, quickly, need to do something. A way to regain dignity! A way to regain dignity... a way to regain - aaah, there isn’t any..!

There was no other way but to admit it. Tessa got up slowly, her shoulders weighed down by the gravity of the situation, and turned towards her crew.

Their faces were absolutely expressionless, even though they must have been shocked, too. They were staring into emptiness, determined not to let a single flicker of emotion get through.

Or not...

Looking more closely, one would notice that the shoulders of some people in the front row were quivering slightly. The neck muscles of some were twitching, and others were doing their best to keep their lips shut, but their irregularly contracting nostrils gave them away. For a soldier, the order to stand at attention was absolute... And they were all dying of laughter, no mistake about it.

What was that? All of the people lined up on the deck are adults, and yet they're ready to laugh at her like at a weebled doll. And now they were politely waiting for thankful words from that girl who always falls down. On top of everything, they all thought it was absolutely correct, and even exemplary to do that. Bunch of idiots...

And she was one, too. Just before, she was preparing with heroic determination and inappropriate pride, to give a final, moving speech full of pathos... how ridiculous it seemed to her now.

Am I not silly? What, I wanted to appear like some kind of perfect being? Pah, a scatterbrain like me getting all fussy and pompous... It was better to just tell them the truth.

“Ahem,” she cleared her throat and looked around. “Everybody, from now on, you’re fired! It was good working with you!”

Saying that, she left the stage.

Mardukas' eyes became round for a moment, but then he regained his composure and shouted:

“Di-is-missed!”

At once the silence gave way to a general commotion. Some were finally able to laugh, some people looked bewildered, others only had a dry smile on their faces. Strangely, it didn't seem like anyone blamed her. Either way, it did not matter now.

A-ah, so that's what it was - above all, she was afraid to disappoint them. That battle ended, too. Afterwards everyone would do whatever they wanted. They were their own masters now.

Among the soldiers she spotted Mao. Their eyes met for a moment - Tessa just shrugged and smiled, but Mao seemed very grieved. Without exchanging a word with anyone, Tessa turned and left the hangar deck.



Mao, Clouseau, and the rest of the assault team loaded up, and the five Pave Mare transport helicopters, their engines roaring, took off from the flight deck. The *Bernie Worell* had also started up, and was leaving *de Danaan*'s side. Most of the crew, fired by Tessa, were returning home, and many of them gathered on the ship's deck, taking off their caps and waving the helicopters goodbye. Sousuke, on the *de Danaan*'s deck, also raised a hand in salute. Ed Sachs seemed to be overcome by a wave of emotions, and as if trying to transmit them all at once, was waving with all his strength. He was the only one of the maintenance crew left, the others were on board the cargo ship. Engineering officer Nora Lemming was also there, leaning on the railing and looking very sadly at those they left behind.

Before long the *Bernie Worell* became barely visible, and procedures for shutting down the flight deck began. The alarm sounded, and the enormous hatch began to slide back into its closed position. In the sky, the sun seemed to follow suit, disappearing behind the horizon.

“Why did you remain?” asked Sousuke, and Sachs frowned.

“There’s some work left, that’s all...”

Sousuke looked at him quizzically.

“...is what I’d love to say, but it was Tessa’s request. I’ve got two kids, you know, and a new candidate to fill in for their mother. It’s pretty tough.”

He sounded like he was complaining, but he didn’t really look dissatisfied. On the contrary, he seemed a bit self-deprecating, but keen and refreshed.

“Bah, even if there was no order, I’d have remained, I think. So... even if I could complain, I should really thank her. Well, I’d better get back to work,” said Sachs, and was about to go down the staircase that led to the hangar deck.

At that moment, the main hatch locked down with a resonating clang. Several locking mechanisms had to activate to ensure the water-tightness of the hatch, and their motors started humming all around them.

“I’ll help.”

“Oh, shut up. That’s not something for you to tamper with. Right, Al?”

He was wearing a headset around his neck, and his microphone seemed to be on.

<The Lieutenant is right, sergeant. Please stand by and support us when needed,> came Al’s voice in Sousuke’s headset.

He knew that the rapid deployment booster was still not properly affixed to the Laevatein, and with the other maintenance crew members gone, Sachs would be working alone.

“Heh, you’re not much help anyway. So just do as you’re told.”

“...very well, then.”

Sousuke left Sachs and went towards the stern of the ship, the living quarters. The usually busy corridors were empty. He went to check out the galley, thinking that because the cook, Kasuya, was gone, he should at least prepare a meal for the remaining crew. That, too, was unnecessary, as it turned out that Kasuya worked overtime, and prepared a few days’ worth of food, just in case. There was a cauldron of curry, lots of rice in the fridge, bread, salad, even pasta. He went as far as to leave behind a note, detailing how exactly everything should be warmed up, and how kitchen appliances should be used. The note ended with simple words “Good luck”.

He suddenly remembered that this was the place he fought the traitor Danigan. Kaname was then hiding in that corner, in tears, and he had to apologize to her over and over...

“How ironic,” he thought.

Each time they talked honestly was in moments like that. It somehow became normal for them to talk candidly during some crisis, incident, or under pressure.

It meant that they started relying on peril itself... if he were to meet and talk to her again, would it be under the same circumstances? He couldn’t even begin to guess. To begin with, she had now lost her sanity. She thought she was acting according to her convictions, while in fact she was being manipulated. Even Tessa did not know any way to turn her back. Was it too late

already? Would she never go back to the girl he knew? But then, wasn't what he was about to do completely futile and meaningless?

“This is bad...”

Sousuke sighed, and massaged his temple with a finger. A tough battle was coming, and he couldn't even concentrate. The future seemed like a swirling mist, his faith in himself was gone, and he felt like he couldn't make even one step forward.

Did he even believe that Tessa's goal was the same as his? Why did she absolutely have to confirm what was happening there? Did she not think at all that he could hinder her plans?

He remembered Sarah's letter once again. Why would she, without explanation, say that she would be on Leonard's side..?

He left the mess room and headed back to the SRT's room. Out of his personal locker he took his favorite Glock 19 and a clip of nine-millimeter ammunition. He didn't even use a holster, just pushed it behind his belt, in the back. Unless he was searched, no one would notice it. He closed the locker and went to the bridge.

When the ship was at sea, this area was off-limits to all but required personnel. Sousuke, being a sergeant of the land assault troop, was not in that list, and naturally, entering that area while carrying a firearm was strictly forbidden, except in the case of a real crisis. But now, who cared... He entered the bridge defiantly.

Tessa, Mardukas, and the rest of the bridge crew looked over their shoulders, and were obviously puzzled to see Sousuke there.

“Sagara-san..?”

He didn't answer immediately. Keeping his usual, sullen expression, he looked around, and imagined.

In the next second, without taking his gun out, he approaches Mardukas, tackles him, and sends him flying towards

the rest of the bridge crew. After that, he puts the gun to Tessa's head, and tells the crew not to move. So simple...

“Sergeant Sagara, did anyone give you a permission to enter the bridge?”

It did not sound like a reprimand - instead, the tone of his voice was that of concern. He also was not a fool, and could consider all, even the most impossible of cases.

No. The idea of taking over the bridge by himself was absurd. Ordering them to stop the attack and then sitting on the bottom of the sea until the time comes, was not something he thought himself capable of.

“Yes, sir, the most senior officer of the assault force,” he answered boldly.

“What are you talking about, sergeant?”

“Myself, sir. I am the only member of the assault force remaining on the ship. Which is why,” he pointed to the left side of the Captain's chair, which used to be Kalinin's place, “I will stand there. With your permission, of course.”

It was not something that he thought of on the spur of the moment - in fact, he was hoping for it from the very beginning.

“Hmm... well, technically you are correct, but...”

“Ah, why not?” said Tessa. “But we still have a ways to go until the area of operations.”

“It doesn't matter.”

“Well then, here's your place. If you get tired, feel free to go out as you want.”

There was no particular ill will in her words, but her manner was quite blunt. Usually she would say something like “I approve”, and that would be it.

Sousuke saw her last address to the crew, but it felt as if she was a bit different now. She looked as tired as ever, but her grim

disposition had vanished. She certainly did not return to her former, cheerful self, but she didn't fall prey to her demons, either.

It felt as if she became more... brazen, or reckless. If one had to compare, that attitude was probably the closest to those times when she would have meaningless disputes with Mao, off-duty. She was a bit peevish, sulking, and at the same time languid. If someone were to ask her what to do during an operation right now, she would probably answer something like "bah, do whatever works".

For some reason, however, he did feel anxious because of that, and the same could be said for Mardukas and the rest of the crew. His eyes met with a navigation officer that was sitting next to him. The latter only raised an eyebrow, and gave a small shrug, as if trying to say "It's a bit strange, innit?" Sousuke inclined his head a little, indicating "I don't know what it's all about, either", and stood near her chair at ease.

He gave Tessa a sidelong glance, as if trying to ask her personally.

"Fine," she must have guessed that he was looking at her, and murmured, "I'm fine. What about you?"

"Ah..."

It was finally time to answer that question. One word of that girl moved him more than anything Mao or Clouseau said to him. She was a far stronger person than him, and as a man, he could not permit himself to give some sort of shallow excuse for an answer. He remained silent and just stood there at ease.

After some time he touched the gun, still concealed on his back. He had never felt so miserably ashamed of carrying a gun in his life.

On the main screen, large numerals indicated the time until arrival to the AO: 12 hours, 12 minutes.



Sousuke stood at ease. He touched the gun that was hidden at his back. It was the first time in his life that he had felt so miserable about carrying a gun.

If he did not find himself before then, he would be a goner.
Only 12 hours and 11 minutes left...



Eighteen hours after they left the *de Danaan*, the assault force was on a small airfield in the west of Nepal. Even though it was supposed to be a race against time, they had already wasted two hours there. The town, called Dipayal, was situated in a river basin in the middle of a mountainous district of the country. The airfield was just outside the town, and was comprised of an unpaved runway and a couple of shacks. It was obviously not designed for anything more than light planes, and because fully loaded C-17's were landing on it, making enough noise to cause an avalanche, it was easy to imagine the inhabitants' astonishment. Mao and the others flew from the *de Danaan* to Brunei by helicopter, then got on board C-17s, and using ECS safely flew over the airspace of Cambodia, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

They were around twelve hundred kilometers from their target, the missile base in Afghanistan. They were waiting here for their last refuel. According to their estimate, they only had about four hours left until the enemy gained missile launch capability.

The air was cold, around 2-3 degrees below zero, and perfectly clear, and their breath escaped in small, white clouds. Fortunately, they wore thick field jackets over the AS pilot uniforms, and so only their faces felt the cold. There was no wind - a graveyard-like stillness and snow-crowned peaks around them created a serene atmosphere.

Some peasants gathered in the distance, watching Mao and the others, who were hurriedly completing the inspection of their

equipment near the prefab shacks. It was natural that they felt uneasy.

“Sheesh, I know that I said I wanted an isolated location for the last stop, but... why this place?” Mao complained to Lemon, who was near her.

“Sorry. There really wasn’t anything better,” said Lemon.

Normally he would just wave it off “*come on, getting this in half a day is a luxury!*” - but he adopted a much more cautious attitude towards Mao.

He was there when Kurz died. What little he heard from Sousuke about the situation on the ground, clearly stated that he was not responsible for anything, but deep inside he probably felt that he could have tried to do something, to help in some way. He had no way of knowing about Mao and Weber’s relationship, and was probably thinking that he let Mao’s subordinate die.

“Nah, doesn’t matter,” she said, closely inspecting an SMG, “but those rubbernecks are starting to worry me. Are you sure the police of that town don’t mind?”

“It... doesn’t look like it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“There’s a Chinese who owes Mr. Hunter some favor, and his brother is a trader that has an office in Nepal, so he bribed a government official, whose cousin is the deputy head of local police and---”

“Right, I got it already, in other words, nothing’s sure.”

“It’s going to be fine. The nearest police station is two hours away by car. Even if some thick-headed local cop comes running, we’ll be out of here long before then.”

“That is, if the package gets here before that.”

The “package” was the drop module for Mao’s M9. In the coming operation both Mao and Clouseau would make an assault

landing, but the *de Danaan* only had one drop module left. They couldn't get another one before they parted ways with Tessa and the others, so a friendly supply troop was supposed to get the module to the airfield. That, too, was delayed, and they were powerless to do anything. She knew very well that it was useless to be angry, but she still continued cursing under her breath.

Lemon, evidently sympathetic to the situation, tried to start a conversation to break up the tension a little.

“So, I heard this drop module is coming from western Bengal. Why on earth would there be M9 equipment there?”

“Leftovers from the Indian Ocean squad that got wiped out a year ago... well, their surviving comrades prepared us for it.”

“Ah, I see... hey, is that them?”

They saw Clouseau talking to someone on the small radio that was lying on top of a rusty drum not ten meters away. After a short exchange, he looked at the soldiers around him, and said loudly:

“Helicopters will be here in five minutes! Get the equipment and fuel ready!”

The soldiers rushed to prepare for the transports' arrival. Mao had readied her kit, and now ran towards the C-17 where her M9 was. After getting it outside, it would take some time to affix the drop module... she quickly got into the M9, that was being unloaded from the transport plane, got some distance between herself and the landing strip, dropped the machine to its knees, and started waiting. The local peasants were gaping at the spectacle - it was probably the first time they'd ever seen an AS. She zoomed in onto them, and saw that one was taking pictures with a cheap digital camera.

“A-ah, I'm sorry, but no pictures...”

She adjusted the machine's head radar to send waves of a certain frequency at maximum power in the short range where she had zoomed in. It was completely harmless to people, but to electronic consumer goods that amount of radiation was lethal. The young man who had been taking the picture clearly seemed bewildered by the fact that it had stopped working, and was fiddling around with it.

“They're coming,” Clouseau's voice came over the radio.

She saw the transport helicopters crossing the mountain ridge to the south. They were derivatives of the Ch-53, frequently used in the Western countries, white fuselage with a bright orange stripe, and horizontal letters “HUNTER AIRLINE”, a suitable disguise for a local private airline company.

The characteristic whine of the turbo shaft engines ripped apart the silence that shrouded the airport. Mao set her machine into the loading standby position, and got out. A helicopter hovered above, rotated, started descending slowly, blowing up clouds of dust, and gently touched down.

Before the rotors stopped, one of the hatches opened, and a slender Asian woman in a beige pantsuit jumped out. She definitely seemed familiar...

“Is that... Wraith?”

It was, indeed, the agent, who worked as a backup for Sousuke when he was guarding Kaname Chidori, back in Tokyo. She was also the person who recovered the core unit of the Arbalest, and delivered the new Laevatein to Sousuke from the research division, and Gavin Hunter personally. Mao didn't get a chance to talk to her personally, but she knew that, like Hunter, she had been helping Sousuke. She heard from Lemon that the woman was attacked by Leonard during the Moscow operation, and went missing since then...

“Wraith!” Lemon was sprinting towards her. “You’re all right, thank God!! Why- how come you’re here?!”

“I’d like to ask you the same. How did you get here?” she asked dryly, without even smiling.

It didn’t look like she was too pleased at the reunion.

Lemon, who looked like he was about to embrace her, seemed to be befuddled by this cold reaction.

“Eh... me? Well, it’s a long story--...”

“I’m joking. I’ve heard the details.”

“Ah, right...”

Mao approached them, and Wraith greeted her with a nod.

“Lieutenant Mao.”

“So you were fine, I’m glad to see that.”

“Thank you. You seem to be in perfect health yourself,”
Wraith smiled politely.

Lemon seemed to be thoroughly displeased at the difference in her attitude, and muttered something to himself.

“After the operation, I was detained by the Moscow police, and subsequently handed over to the GRU. There was a mentor of mine, from the old student days, to whom I felt indebted... anyway, I was released after an exchange of information. If it was the KGB, I’d still be in prison...”

The KGB and GRU were two distinct intelligence agencies that represented the Soviet Union. The KGB acted as the hound of the Communist Party, while the GRU represented the military counter-intelligence. Very roughly, it was the difference between a politician and a military man, so their behavior was “relatively” different. That said, they still could not live without providing information to each other, albeit cautiously.

“Exchanging information with the GRU? Like what?”



“Why did we investigate Yamsk 11, and other related things. I didn’t say anything that could put you all in jeopardy.”

“Hmm...”

“I do understand that you would not believe my words alone. However, the GRU wanted a contact with you. Their top officials had noticed the threat of Amalgam a while ago, and wanted to be free from its influence, if at all possible.”

“This is all great, but shouldn’t you be talking to Tessa about it? Though she’s at sea now, and no communications can be made.”

“Right now I came for a different reason. There are two main things I would like to let you know. Is there a table somewhere..?”

“No tables. Come here,” Lemon led them to the nearest ammo box.

Wraith unfolded the flexible screen she had with her. Poking at it several times with her finger, she brought up a detailed view of the missile base.

“This is the latest information, courtesy of the GRU. All the electronic locks, as well as the launch systems, are in here.”

The 3D map of the base had some written comments here and there, probably added by someone who knew it well. Compared to that, the information Mao and the others had was nothing more than a rough sketch that could not be relied upon.

“Wow, that is... incredible,” breathed Mao, playing around with the screen.

“Think you can use it?”

“Absolutely. If we relied on what we have, it’d be like diving in blindfolded.”

“I’m glad it can help. I knew it was dangerous to send it online, so I rushed here as soon as I learned the location from Mr. Hunter...”

“So, why is GRU interested?”

“Isn’t that obvious? Those fellows who took over the missile base are out of control.”

“Exactly. They had already sent a quite considerable force to recapture it, and it seems they had been wiped out by the enemy AS.”

Hearing that, Mao laughed sarcastically.

“Isn’t it always the same... when the fire gets out of control, it’s our turn to try and put it out. They really rely on us too much.”

“But ‘who dares wins’, wouldn’t you say?” remarked Clouseau, who had come up behind them unnoticed. “Thanks to this information, the infantry’s work will become easier. We are grateful, Wraith.”

“No thanks are needed. Now, it’s not that important, but I do have another message--...”

Before she had time to finish, Clouseau turned to the infantry squad and shouted:

“Assemble for briefing! Changes in the operation following new info!”

“Ah...”

“Sorry, you can leave the less important talk for later, we need to discuss the tactics first.”

The members and team leaders of the infantry force, Yang Jun-Kyu and Roger Sandarapta, assembled promptly, and were quickly given new instructions regarding team composition, insertion routes, and the like. They had the time to memorize the changes and ask their questions, before Clouseau finally said:

“That is all. Any other questions?”

Mao raised her hand. She didn’t have any particular questions on the operation, but she suddenly realized that it may be the last time they were all together, and wanted to say something to her fellow soldiers.

“Can I? It’s not a question though...”

Her eyes met Clouseau’s. He knew very well that compared to himself, who was transferred to the Pacific, she was a veteran of the force. He felt that he should give her some time, and nodded, as if saying “do as you want”.

She looked around at those with whom she had shared joys and sorrows in those past years. She knew every face in the crowd - they all seemed relaxed, but Mao’s eyes were not fooled that easily. Everyone was extremely tense.

They were thirty-two. There was a time when the force was much larger, but some people had left the unit, some had been shifted to a different location, and of course some had been killed in action or retired because of their wounds. For this final strike that was all they had.

“I think this may be my last chance, so I just wanted to say something to you all... Well...”

She couldn’t seem to find any words that would fit the occasion. She now understood how hard it was for Tessa to find parting words, to give a last speech. She, however, did not have to shoulder a burden as heavy as that girl. As a normal, ordinary person, she obviously wanted to say what was on her mind to those fellows. Yeah, why not just say it...

“The situation’s pretty bad. The operation itself is difficult, the crisis couldn’t be more serious, and there probably won’t be enough time. But there’s one thing that’s even worse. You know what?”

“Eh?”

“No idea...”

People were shrugging, looking at her quizzically, and finally she said:

“The fact that you bunch are the ones saving the world.”

Everyone started laughing. Some people were clapping their knee, doubled up in laughter, some smiled and looked at the sky, leaning on their neighbor's shoulder. Clouseau was smiling broadly and shaking his head, as if in disbelief. The outsiders, Lemon and Wraith, seemed to be puzzled by this display of joyous self-deprecation.

Mao continued, grinning all the while:

“No, just look at us, right? Maybe we should leave it to some other fellows that at least look presentable!”

“Really, you’re right, hahah... spot on..!”

“Aw, why’d you have to be so nasty... heheh...”

“We definitely ain’t the ones for the job, haha...”

Mercenaries like them were really little more than a bunch of vagabonds. They usually died meaningless deaths in meaningless operations, and their lives had nothing to do with honor or virtue. Then how did it come to this? After all, they were about to take back a nuclear missile base, to prevent World War III, fighting for hundreds of millions of lives... didn’t all of this look like a bad joke?

“But, you know,” Mao waited until the laughter had stopped, and continued, “the things we’ve done to get this far, they weren’t pointless. All the training, and the operations, and those we lost. They all had meaning.”

Those they had lost... the soldiers were nodding in approval.

“Bah, they’re probably laughing at us now,” said one of them, “imagine what Kurz would say - that we’re doomed because he’s not with us, or something.”

“Yeah, that’d be like him.”

“He’s sure not praying for our safety or anything,” laughed another.

It was a different kind of laughter, laced with notes of sadness and weariness.

“Then let’s do it, and prove him wrong!”

“Yeah, let’s!”

“I’d like to see his disappointed face...”

All of them answered her in the same way.

“I have nothing more to say, Ben.”

“Good work. Then, start preparing for departure! Get to it!”

All the soldier immediately got back to their work.

They had changed almost visibly, and were now full of inspiration. Their gait was reassured, their voices were full of energy, and they knew exactly what they had to do.

Mao thought that “let’s prove Kurz wrong!” was a good motto. Of course, he wouldn’t ever wish for them to fail, and everybody understood that. As adults, they would have been just somewhat embarrassed to say “let’s do this for Kurz”. And they were not thinking about him alone - as the friend they had lost a short time ago, he represented all of their comrades who perished in battle up until then.

“Let’s prove you wrong... Kurz”, she muttered, smiling to herself.

Kurz... your sniping was good, and you were sometimes useful, too - I’m showing a little gratitude here, so don’t be angry up there, okay? I can see you relaxing with the other guys, beer in one hand...

“...by the way, Wraith,” Mao remembered something, and turned to the woman, who had been standing near her all this time. “What was that other thing you wanted to say?”

Wraith didn’t answer. Her face was troubled, as if she had something to say, but was struggling with it. She was very calm

and composed up until then, but for some reason reacted strangely to that final speech.

“Wraith?”

“Eh? Ah, yes, -yes, what?”

“The other message you had for us..?”

“Er, message? no, nothing...”

“Hey, is something wrong? You look pale.”

“Oh, er, do I..? That must be... the climate... and the pressure here is low...”

“Ah... right. So, about the message? Ben looks busy at the moment, just tell it to me, I’ll let him know.”

“Er... no, it’s... nothing, really. Forget it.”

“What is it?”

“No, really, nothing. Your fellows’ morale has been raised, and I don’t want to be the one pouring cold water onto them, so to speak.”

“Eh, what do you mean?”

“Just... don’t worry about it! It must have been my misunderstanding. There’s only a piece of news. I hope the information from the GRU helps. Well then...”

“O- hey, wait...”

Ignoring Mao, Wraith hurriedly left the scene.



The loading of all of the troops’ equipment was finally complete, and the transport plane was taking off from the small Tibetan airport. The disposable rocket boosters, affixed to the plane for a short takeoff, emitted an ear-splitting roar.

Lemon, after seeing off the transport plane with Mao and the other soldiers, helped the supply troop to pack up and withdraw.

He spotted Wraith, who also remained behind, talking on a satellite phone in a corner of the airfield. He had no idea with whom she would be talking now, but he saw that she was frantically trying to calm down the other party.

“... I’ve already explained the situation..! Yes, I did not tell them... Why? but... no, I had no choice..! No, that’s not it..! If the team’s mood was raised by that alone, I’d be taking it away, no..?. ah, that’s why I was... don’t say this, and don’t do anything rash. No, on a second thought, just shoot yourself, that would be the best, going with the flow. I’ll speak to Lieutenant Colonel Kirienko, he’ll arrange it... what? No, dammit, why would I know that..? But you did understand, right..? Oh shut up, stop yelling at me! Over and out!”

She fiercely pressed the off button on the phone.

“My God, I swear, if that’s not the most annoying fellow I’ve ever met in this world...”

She continued grumbling, and put down the phone.

Lemon, very curious about what was going on, called her.

“Hey...”

“Waah!?”

She hadn’t noticed him at all, and almost jumped at his voice.

“Le... Lemon, it’s just you... what is it?”

“Well, you seemed a bit weird there in front of Mao-san. Whom were you talking to?”

“Er, well,” she hesitated for a moment. “Well, since you’ll only be able to speak to them after the operation anyway, I can tell you...”

“Eh..?”

“Well, originally I brought them another message...”

And Wraith told him what she was hiding.

Hearing her story, Lemon finally nodded in agreement.

“Yes, you’re right. This wouldn’t help them at all...”

“I just couldn’t, that would have been too awkward.”

With an annoyed look, she picked up the phone once again, and started calling somewhere else.

“Who is it this time?”

“Hunter.”

She had a very short exchange with him, but her face grew more and more serious by the minute.

“Is there a problem?” asked Lemon, when she had put down the phone.

“The expected time until the enemy gets the missile launch codes – is less than three hours.”

“That’s much faster than we expected..!”

Very secure codes are necessary to launch nuclear missiles. The safety device is completely tamper-proof, and there is a very limited amount of attempts to enter it. If someone unsuccessfully attempted an unauthorized launch, the firing circuits would immediately burn out, and in that case, one would have to go to a base around 2000km away to get the parts, which were kept there in secure storage - otherwise a second attempt was simply impossible.

The GRU had possibly provided the number of digits, and information about the model of the safety device. Knowing that, and estimating Amalgam’s code-breaking capabilities was all they could do - it was little more than a guess, at the end.

Three hours...

“Is that an optimistic estimate?”

“I’m afraid so. They may be faster.”

It would take their troops a little less than two hours to get to the AO. Even if the estimate was correct, the assault force would

have almost no time left. Taking a mountain stronghold within one hour...

“We’re talking about Mithril’s SRT here, they can do it.”

Wraith didn’t say anything. She wasn’t a person who liked consolation, and there wasn’t much she could say, anyway.

“If we remained in this wilderness, we could probably escape the missiles.”

“Hey, what--...”

“Just kidding. Let’s go.”

The preparations for withdrawal from the area were well under way. Soon, all the remaining equipment and parts were loaded onto the transport helicopters, their engines once again disrupted the natural silence of those mountains, and after their final roll-call, the supply unit loaded up into the machines.

“Well, it’s time to make preparations in case this goes well.”



The final calibrations were entering their last stage.

Kaname had locked herself in the control room near TARTAROS since yesterday, losing herself in the rewriting of the control codes and fine-tuning of the device. The construction of the gigantic machine had ended, and now only the personnel necessary for a detailed inspection of the device remained on the scene. In a few hours, the geothermal power station would reach planned capacity, thus being able to maintain necessary power levels. The adjustment of control codes should be finished by then, too.

She practically didn’t sleep these two days, only sometimes taking a nap on a bench that was left outside of the control room, and went to get a sandwich downstairs - otherwise she allowed herself no breaks.

Yes, nobody was forcing her, her own desire kept pushing her forward. She did not mind working with hardly any rest - bringing that apparatus to completion was exceptionally gratifying.

The TARTAROS was bringing a revolution. It was a device that rendered meaningless the concept of time and history that has been weighing down humans for so long. You could say, it controlled fate - and she was proud to carry the burden of the one who would lead the world onto a new path. Everything should be entrusted to her, and she would undoubtedly satisfy everyone's wishes.

She had been in that constant state of exaltation and euphoria ever since she returned from Yamsk 11. Not a single trace of doubt, always full of energy and vigor.

The body, however, would not support this. Even now she was sometimes assaulted by waves of sleepiness, and the vast flow of thoughts inside her mind had become disjointed.

Right now, she noticed that, her fingers stopped above the keyboard, and she lifted her eyes towards the ceiling.

“Ah... no, no, I can’t, not now.

She blinked several times, then clapped herself on the cheeks. She had stopped again, for the umpteenth time. Thinking of operational efficiency, it would perhaps be better to take a short nap right now.

And then she noticed.

In one of the windows she was working on, at the end of the iota wave supposition lens group alignment script, were words that didn't belong there.

//anata wa atashi jya nai;

It was Japanese. There was no Japanese language pack installed on the PC, so it was displayed in romaji. “You are not me”? She didn’t understand the meaning. Who wrote those? Certainly not herself.

However, no one else was around, and no one worked on the script except her. She didn’t think it possible to write that, even half-asleep, but even if it was the case, she didn’t understand. Asleep or awake, her thoughts were filled with the completion of the TARTAROS, so how did those words come out? You are not me... what..?

“Tch...”

For some reason she became very irritated, even angry, thought she didn’t understand why she was feeling those emotions. She wanted to take the screen in front of her and throw it on the floor.

Don’t joke around! Don’t give me this crap. Why did these words appear there? I am myself, and you’re talking nonsense.

Wait... no... who is this? Who... who am I getting angry at?

“Aah, what’s wrong with me,” she groaned, burying her face in her hands.

That feeling... it was as if someone, somewhere, was constantly yelling at her, and protesting against everything she did. Yes, that was it, it had happened before. Thinking about it now, she remembered that she had the same feeling on the plane from Yamsk 11 to Merida.

Tears started flowing down her cheeks because of that strange sensation. They were unpleasant, salty tears...

Even more obvious was the time when she had a visit from Leonard. A month earlier, Leonard came to her room to talk about technical details, but then she proposed to sit on the sofa, and made some tea. After Yamsk 11, he had been a perfect gentleman, and

did not make any inappropriate attempts to catch her off guard. But that time was a bit different.

He had taken her hand, and she did not object. It was late at night. She thought that it was time to reward his devotion, even though her former self would have obstinately continued to reject him. She thought it would be truly pitiful, if he had to leave this world like that. Why not tonight then?

When she told him that, he only smiled sadly for some reason. But he didn't become timid, or suddenly hesitate. Like with any other woman probably, he put his hand around her, and leaned forward to kiss...

And then that feeling came.

It wasn't exactly self-hatred, or revulsion towards Leonard. The closest description would be discomfort, as if someone was peering over her shoulder - a dreadfully unpleasant feeling. On top of everything, that someone was very angry at her - and rightly so - for the things she was doing.

It made her turn her face away from Leonard, hiding her own uneasiness. "Sorry," she then said, "let's not". He only answered "I understand", and left the room.

And that was it. Since then, he didn't lay a finger upon her.

Why did she have that feeling? She couldn't be anyone but herself. She thought and acted by her own will. And she was doing the right thing. Even so, doubts constantly emerged out of nowhere, and stirred her heart.

Don't worry. You're just tired. Come to think of it, you've only done these all-nighters when you were preparing for the school festival. You've done enough, now a short sleep would be fine, wouldn't it?

"Right! Let's sleep!"

She stood up from her chair resolutely.



Why not tonight then? When she told him that, he only smiled sadly for some reason. But he didn't become timid, or suddenly hesitate.

This manner of speaking, these fast decisions. This is me, no question about that. An hour should be fine, I'll wrap myself in that futon. This might be my last sleep in this world, so let's enjoy it!

Informing the guard outside of the control room of her intentions, she threw herself down on the bench.



Only fifty nautical miles left.

The first thing that stood in the way between the *Tuatha de Danaan* and Merida Island was the United States Navy.

The sonar room reported “one submarine, bearing 0-8-6, eighteen miles, heading two-six-five at ten knots. Identifier ‘Mike-Five’ assigned to target.”

It was too far away to know the name of the submarine, but it was without mistake an improved version of the Los-Angeles class.

“It looks like they were waiting for us,” said Mardukas.

“Hm, yes, probably. There should be at least four others in the area,” muttered Tessa.

Four submarines of the Pacific fleet - and it was possible that more were waiting for them, all with the orders to sink the *Tuatha de Danaan*, known to them as the “Toy Box”.

Tessa had obtained that information without accessing Mithril’s channels. It was at a dinner party a year ago, from one of the guests, retiring rear admiral Thomas Ross. He had been the commanding officer of the Pacific Fleet’s submarine group, and had some connections in the Hawaii HQ. That admiral Ross then informed her of the situation by an encrypted channel.

The idea of attacking the “Toy Box” was pushed through by the party of the current Secretary of Defense, who, as one could guess, was an Amalgam collaborator. He had tried to play on the current crisis between the Americans and the Soviets to make the President give the order. In the HQ a lot of questions appeared about that order, and it seemed they were reluctant to proceed. With the Soviet Far East Fleet being very active, moving some of their forces to a relatively unimportant area of the ocean, where the “Toy Box” appeared, did not seem very logical - but orders were orders. They couldn’t officially let their doubt be known, much less disobey. In short, they were now hunting the “Toy Box” with complete devotion, and wouldn’t consider going easy on it.

“Sorry, I wasn’t able to help much”, Admiral Ross had written to her. “Roy and his fellows, and the thing they pocketed got exposed, and they’re now in military jail, John had fled the MP investigation and is now missing. If Jerry was still alive, something could be done about this...”

“Jerry” was the nickname of the Admiral Jerome Borda, Mithril’s chief of operations. He was in Sidney HQ at the time of the general attack and was presumed dead, even though because of the massive blast no body was found. Thinking about the loss of Admiral Borda, who was like a father to her, was still hard for Tessa, even a year after the events.

But enough about her acquaintances in the Navy, now was the time to concentrate on the enemy in front of her. Tessa looked at the information displayed on the main screen once again. The Los Angeles-class sub was heading away from them. The vessel adopted an S-shaped patrol route that would allow them to detect any intruders in their area. Most likely, they were using a towed sonar, and would sooner or later discover the *de Danaan*, which was moving at fifty knots - the speed of a torpedo - and thus could

not help leaving an acoustic signature. There was no other way to avoid detection than to descend and decelerate - for the *de Danaan*, it was like switching from a jog to a crawl. If they proceeded cautiously, they could get close to Merida avoiding detection and confrontation with the US Navy. That, however, would significantly delay their arrival at the island, roughly by fifty minutes, and that was an optimistic estimate.

“An hour and fifty minutes in total, then...”

Was that an admissible delay? Unlike the Afghan mission, they barely had any information about the possible time of operation of the TAROS. At best Tessa could make a guess based on the information from spy satellites. She had little confidence in her estimates, but she thought that they didn’t have time to spare. Leonard and Kalinin wouldn’t leave them any, so they had to hurry.

“And besides...”

Was the US Navy alone guarding the approach to the island? No, most likely Amalgam’s submarine forces were also there. A type of underwater AS, “Leviathan”, was mentioned in the documents Kaname left for them in Mexico, and was likely to make an appearance. The US Navy vessels were like hunting dogs, restricting their approach route, so that they would end up in the hunting ground of the Leviathans.

“Then...”

She made her decision.

“Crew to battle stations.”

“Aye, aye, Ma’am. Battle stations!” Mardukas repeated the order, and the ship’s AI, Dana, issued the appropriate alert. All the screens turned red, and the words “BATTLE ALERT” appeared on them. That said, with the number of people left on the submarine, all personnel was already at their stations.

Tessa continued giving orders.

“Starboard ahead full, course 0-3-0.”

“Starboard ahead full, 0-3-0, aye.”

They would not even try to hide or escape. They would hit the enemy from the flank.

She saw Sousuke showing signs of surprise, which was only natural, but Mardukas did not appear to be opposed to the decision, either.

“Oh, you do not object?”

“No. In chess I would call this a gambit. I often used them when playing, so I do not have any aversion to this tactic,” he said with a faint smile.

She thought she had come to know him well those past few years, but that was unexpected.

“So, Captain, what is our next move?”

“They’ll soon notice us, so proceed on this course until they make a move.”

They were travelling at sixty knots, which was double the maximum speed of an ordinary submarine. That gigantic size, and yet what speed - the forty-four thousand ton vessel was ploughing through the waters of the ocean at more than one hundred kilometers an hour. The EMFC system that covered the hull of the ship managed the water current, but could not help avoid turbulence. The floor vibrated, and the vessel’s structure creaked and groaned a little under the pressure.

They were alone against about ten enemy vessels. Sensing that the fight ahead would be hard, Tessa called Sousuke:

“Sagara-san?”

“Yes?”

“You shouldn’t stay here any longer. Take Al and load up into elevator zero.”

That was the main elevator of the hangar deck that all ship-borne planes and AS used for takeoff. Tessa obviously meant that he should be ready for launch at any moment.

Sousuke didn't answer immediately, but hesitated for a moment. He was probably thinking: "If I reply right now, could I leave the bridge a little later?"

Tessa understood his thoughts well. It was probably his last sortie, and it was possible that they'd never meet again, and she was sending him away only with a short order? Did she want to say something to him?

The enemy still didn't show any signs of activity, and they had a little time. If there was something... something that she wanted to tell him, she would have to do it now.

After a moment of silence, she said quietly:

"Please give Kaname-san my regards."

A multitude of emotions passed like shadows on Sousuke's face, and then disappeared. There was a bit of gratitude and respect, anxiety and concern, and most prominently, guilt, all mixed together.

"I will. Then, if you'll excuse me."

Saying that, Sousuke left the bridge. She couldn't leave her post to see him off. The farewell, however, was not as heartrending as one would have thought. No, she still had lingering feelings for him, and even though it was not passionate love, like before, and they could not enjoy a close relationship, she still felt a deep affection. There was no tragic sorrow, however. Well, it was only natural that she felt that way after calming down. Thanks to him, she had enjoyed feeling like a normal girl of her age, though a couple of years earlier she thought she already had a lifetime's worth of experience.

Thank you. And my regards to Kaname-san.

That was really all she wanted to say to him.

About a minute after Sousuke had left, the sonar operator reported:

“Conn, sonar – Mike five changed course to 3-0-5, accelerating to fifteen knots.”

Well, it looked like the battle was about to start.

She chased all thoughts of Sousuke out of her head, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She regained her concentration, and opened her eyes again. New information started pouring onto the main screen.

With that, unknown to the rest of the world, Teletha Testarossa plunged into the greatest underwater battle in history.

Chapter 3: Pale Horse

The enemy vessel changed course abruptly. Its towed sonar was practically running perpendicular to the course of the *de Danaan*, and thus they got a clear reading of its acoustic signature. In any case, the *de Danaan* could no longer hide.

“How’s DEMON⁸? ”

“Picked up the signature, analyzing...”

They and the other vessel had been closing in on each other fast, and sonar had the time to gather plenty of data. Thanks to the skill of chief sonar operator Dejlani, they already had the ship’s name.

“... here it is. It’s the *Asheville*. ”

The SSN-758 *Asheville*, according to the data received only last week, it was Commander Hogan’s ship. He was not an acquaintance, but according to his file, he had a spotless career, not one setback on record. Father of two. Soon to be transferred to a desk job. He seemed to love his family, the Navy, and his country. This was going to be a major blow to his career.

The *de Danaan*’s sonar easily picked up the rest of the enemy fleet. It was as they feared - three other submarines nearby, possibly two anti-submarine destroyers on the surface, and two anti-submarine helicopters. However, not only conventional weapons were arrayed against them. The sonar picked up five signatures of smaller vessels that lie in wait for them - the Leviathans, most likely.

“A warm welcome, I should say. Shall we start? ”

⁸ DEMOdulated Noise - used mainly to determine a contact’s speed.

“Let’s give them a show. Load all tubes. Priority target is Mike five, then Mike seven. The rest at other submarines, your discretion.”

“Aye, aye, Ma’am. Load tubes one to six. Two target Mike five, two to Mike seven. Sierra six and eight get one each,” repeated the weapons officer, and the submarine’s automatic loading system started its work. Loading all the torpedo tubes took barely twenty seconds. On top of that, Tessa ordered to load the Multipurpose VLS with four anti-ship and two anti-air missiles, as well as two MAGROCs - eight launches in total. All the while, the ship was slowly rising to periscope depth. Data was analyzed once again, and the number of enemies settled - thirteen US and Amalgam units were prepared to meet them.

“I’ll meet you all,” whispered Tessa, smiling faintly.

It was a smile that hadn’t appeared on her face since a long time ago, a feeling that she had almost forgotten, an excitement in her heart that she hadn’t allowed herself to enjoy for a long while.

I’ll show you all who you’re up against.

“Flood all tubes.”

“All tubes, flooding, aye.”

“Open muzzle doors.”

“Muzzle doors open, aye.”

Turbulence increased dramatically - still continuing to cruise at full speed, the submarine opened all of its launch tube doors. The ship’s vibration, and the amount of noise it emitted, both increased proportionally. Now the enemy knew where they were, and what their intention was. The *Asheville*, marked as a priority target, went to flank speed and tried to escape to the southwest. Other contacts, too, hurriedly began their maneuvers.

Too late.

“Weapons free.”

“Aye-aye Ma’am! Torpedoes away!”

The *Tuatha de Danaan* fired its entire arsenal at once - fourteen launches, when the normal salvo was one or two torpedoes. Seen from outside, it must have been quite a sight: six silver fish being ejected from the ship’s bow, their engines kicking in and propelling them through the water at seventy knots; eight missiles being ejected on top of the surface from the MVLS, their rocket engines blasting them into the sky.

“All weapons away, launch went without a hitch, Captain. All doors closed, beginning to drain the tubes,” finally reported the weapons officer.

“Wonderful. Now, in all odd-numbered tubes load self-propelled mines, in even-numbered ones, normal torpedoes.”

“Aye, one, three and five loading ADSLMM, two four and six loading ADCAP torpedoes.”

“Hold course and speed. Dive to two hundred fifty, down five degrees rudder.”

“Aye, Ma’am. Bringing her down to two-fifty, down five degrees rudder.”

Well, now, let’s see what the enemy will do.

She was looking at the map of the battlefield on the main screen, the fired missiles being displayed as symbols with their trajectory, velocity and other data nearby, as well as the enemy targets. It seemed that this attack had made them lose their coherence, and both the US Navy vessels and the Leviathans were scattering. They were faced with fourteen missiles cutting them off from escape routes or hiding places. They probably thought that the battlefield had gone crazy all of a sudden. All of the combined tactics that they had likely prepared became useless. They had their hands full with evasive maneuvers and interception, as well as damage control.

“Sea Sparrows have hits on target.”

The improved version of the “Sea Sparrow” anti-air missiles were the first to reach their respective targets. Their warheads had drastically reduced explosive charge, that the crew called “non-lethal shots”⁹. In theory they would not bring their targets crashing down immediately.

“I got one landing on the water, though it’s faint... yes, one emergency landing on water, the other one barely stayed in the air.”

They had practically knocked out the enemy’s anti-submarine helicopters. Even if there were casualties among their crew, it was simply not possible to go easier on them, even if they were fellow countrymen.

With their first move, they had removed the most annoying enemy.

“Harpoons are closing in on target.”

Next were the two surface ships - the anti-submarine frigates. The AD Harpoons were rapidly approaching their mark. The frigates were not Aegis-class, had little in terms of anti-aircraft equipment, and could not use CIWS¹⁰ to shoot down the approaching missiles.

On the screen, the symbols of the enemy vessels and the missiles were almost on top of each other.

“Impact... getting last data from Turtle One... analyzing... Mike eight, hit near the water line... Mike eleven, hit near water line.”

⁹ In the text it's "mineuchi", which means "back of the sword". It's a trope related to Japanese swordsmanship “using the non-cutting edge of the katana” that appears in a lot of manga/anime/related fiction.

¹⁰ Stands for Close-in Weapon System, naval point defence for shooting down missiles or planes at close range. The most widely known in fiction is the US-made Phalanx.

The AD Harpoons were a quite different weapons system from the old Harpoon missiles. When a missile began its final approach, the guidance switched from radar to optical, and the intelligent recognition system allowed it to hit a desired part of the target.

The two frigates were hit near their stern, in the propulsions systems, and were now dead in the water.

“MAGROCs have landed on the water¹¹, started pursuit of Sierra fifteen and Sierra eighteen.”

They had fired MAGROCs at two Leviathans out of five, but were not expecting them to hit. The enemy was too nimble for that, so they had picked two that represented the most threat to the *de Danaan*, and shot at them to restrict their movement for a while. The Leviathans reacted to the attack as expected, abandoning the optimal attack positions, and taking evasive action.

Next were the torpedoes. They lagged behind the missiles in speed, but reached their targets nonetheless.

“*Asheville* deploying counter-measures.”

Their priority target was making frantic attempts to avoid the torpedoes, and launched acoustic decoys. Those efforts were in vain, however, as both torpedoes detonated in close proximity to the submarine. Of course, they also carried reduced charges. At most they would destroy the screws or make small gashes in the ship’s hull, but that was more than enough.

The other three vessels were at a distance, so Tessa could not hope for perfect hits. Even so, one of them seemed to be overtaken by helplessness, and was charting an erratic course away

¹¹ MAGROC, evidently an advanced version of ASROC (Anti-Submarine ROcket), is basically a missile that carries a torpedo as payload. The torpedo then separates from the missile and plunges into the water.

from the scene; another blew its ballast tanks for emergency surfacing.

Three US submarines out of action, if temporarily. Only one remained, and far from trying to escape, it seemed to be heading straight for the *de Danaan* for a frontal attack, after it had barely evaded the one torpedo. The enemy sub was now at two o'clock, and preparing to attack the *de Danaan*.

"He's quite capable," said Mardukas in an admiring tone. The commanding officer of that submarine had both guts and skill.

"What's the ship's name?"

"Unknown yet, Ma'am, just a little more... Analysis complete. Ah," sonar operator Dejlani sounded like he didn't want to say it. "It's them again, the *Pasadena*."

Tessa quickly scanned through the recently received data. The commanding officer of the SSN-752 *Pasadena* was none other than Killy Benjamin Sailor.

"Sailor-san, why now..."

She knew Commander Sailor personally, even though their encounter little more than a year ago, at Christmas, was pure chance. Sailor, though, remembered her only as a cute maid on a cruise ship, and couldn't even imagine her being the Captain of the "Toy Box".

"Captain, what shall we with this one?"

"We don't have time to mess around, the other Leviathans are coming. Starboard, all engines flank speed, come to course 1-2-5."

"Aye, Ma'am. Starboard, all flank speed, course 1-2-5."

It was a daring maneuver, - accelerating and passing just on the *Pasadena*'s starboard, but it looked like they plotted a course for a head-on collision. There was no time to fire a torpedo at them.

Just a little more...

“Conn, sonar! Torpedo launch! Bearing 0-6-2, from Sierra seventeen!”

Ah, there it came, from one of the Leviathans. The timing was pretty bad.

“Mark, Sierra seventeen, fire two and four when ready.”

“Aye! Mark Sierra seventeen! Torpedoes away!”

They fired two torpedoes at the Leviathan, passed by the *Pasadena* and dived at the same time. Sailor had evidently thought that they had shot at him, but was unflinching and fired torpedoes. However, that was beyond the capabilities of their guidance systems. They passed by the *de Danaan* a hundred meters above and to the left. The *de Danaan*'s torpedoes also went by the *Pasadena* and towards the Leviathan that was hanging back. Comparing it to a sword fight, Tessa had dodged the point of Sailor's sword, and risking her life, lunged at the assassin who had come from behind Sailor's back.

The *de Danaan* had passed only dozens of meters away from the *Pasadena*, and they thought they could hear Sailor's raging voice.

“Enemy torpedo, closing in, distance six hundred! Five hundred..! Our torpedo closing in on target, two hundred! One hundred!”

The Leviathan was trying to avoid both torpedoes and went into a dizzying evasive maneuver.

“Fifty... hit on target!”

Sonar reported a detonation. It was only a couple of hundred meters in front of them, and the shockwave rocked the warship. There was no time to check the results - enemy torpedoes were approaching.

“Enemy torpedo at four hundred!”

Three hundred... two hundred... now.

“Hard to port, full rudder!”

“Aye!”

The helmsman executed her order, bringing the rudder to its maximum possible angle, practically sending the ship in a spin, slipping sideways through the water.

Distance one fifty... one hundred...

“All hands, brace for impact!” Tessa’s voice resonated through the ship’s intercom speakers.

...fifty... detonation.



When he heard her warning, Sousuke was running in the passageway immediately near the main hangar. The impact came only a few seconds later, and Sousuke felt its full strength.

At first he thought the lights had gone out, the left wall suddenly came at him, and finally the ceiling came down and crushed him. In reality, he himself was bounced around like a doll with incredible force. If he hadn’t changed into the AS pilot suit, he would have had a few broken bones.

As soon as he was thrown back onto the floor, he got up. It was still pitch black, and through the buzzing in his ears, he heard some kind of very loud noise, as if gas was escaping from somewhere. Emergency lighting finally turned on, painting everything in its familiar crimson. A jet of vapor came from ruptured pipes a couple of meters behind him. What were those pipes for? Was it water that gushed from them? No, it just looked like hot vapor. Would it be better to try and stop that? But how? He knew next to nothing about the operation of the submarine. That was the time to call crew to help, but the bare minimum was

on board. There was no one around. He remembered that there was an intercom just ten steps away, at the entrance of the hangar.

The ship continued to tremble. Sousuke got up, staggered to the intercom and tried to reach the bridge. The damage control officer answered first.

“This is damage control! Report on situation!”

“This is Sagara, I’m currently in--...”

“I know where you are, dammit, report!”

Sousuke quickly looked around for the number of the passageway, and answered:

“No casualties! Five meters from the entrance of the hangar deck, the... I don’t know the name, some pipe ruptured, and vapor is coming out! Otherwise--...”

A thunderous roar interrupted him in mid-sentence. Out of the wall where the pipe was, burst a torrent of water, that looked like it was coming from a large fire hose. The water quickly rushed in and was already ankle-high.

“We’ve got flooding! It’s coming from the left wall, under high pressure--...”

“Got it, is anyone else there?”

“Negative! I’m alone!”

The water had already risen to his knees. The stream was flowing into the hangar with a force that almost kicked him off his feet.

“Into the hangar, now! I’m locking this down!”

“Roger!”

Even before Sousuke answered, the main watertight bulkhead began closing down. He wanted to ask about the battle, the situation on the ship, the casualties, but he didn’t have time. The massive double bulkheads, as thick as a national bank’s safe doors, were closing down with frightening speed.

Sousuke ran towards the exit, kicking up water, and managed to slip under the door, which closed behind him. There seemed to be no flooding in the hangar. The wide space, much larger than a school gym, would under normal circumstances house a unit of ASes, transport and scout helicopters, and STOVL attack craft, but was now deserted. There was nothing apart from the Laevatein, one transport helicopter, some containers and various equipment. There was no one in sight, the maintenance and deck crew had left the ship earlier. It was strange, not hearing any screams or shouts after the severe shock. Only the sounds of battle resonated in the empty deck.

The container in front of Sousuke was sliding down with a metallic grating noise to the starboard side, following the ship's inclination. If something like that was flying around at the time of the impact, there could have been serious injuries, it was lucky that the hangar was empty.

Wait - empty? There was one person who was still working down there..!

“Lieutenant Sachs!”

He had to be there for the final adjustments on the Laevatein, but was nowhere in sight.

“Lieutenant!! Are you here?” shouted Sousuke, but no answer came.

He ran towards the Laevatein, and started looking for him. The AS, in its typical kneeling posture, was securely anchored to the deck with cables, but the external power supply unit, which should have been connected to the machine, had turned over and fallen near its leg. It was the size of a large refrigerator, and looked like it had fallen from some height, having crushed some parts and equipment... and on one of its corners, Sousuke saw fresh blood.

“Shit...”

He couldn't resist cursing. Behind the smashed power unit, near the leg of the AS, Lieutenant Sachs was lying in a puddle of blood.

“Lieutenant..!”

He called him in a hushed whisper, then rushed over to him, and grabbed his shoulder. Sachs was alive, but only barely. His crushed chest was likely causing massive internal bleeding, and it was likely that some protruding parts had pierced his body, stuck between the power unit and the wall. An ordinary man would have been killed instantly...

“Saga...ra... is it,” murmured Sachs, his voice barely audible. “I... my mistake... too slow... unit wasn't fixed... hah... this is bad...”

Blood was flowing from his mouth, and onto his beard.

“Don't talk, don't move. I'll call Lieutenant Goldbery.”

He rushed to the intercom and called the ship's chief medical officer. It sounded like she had other casualties there, but said that she would run to the hangar immediately. He ran back to Sachs, found a first-aid kit in the equipment around them, and tried to inspect his injuries closely.

“This is... useless... innit...”

“Hold on there, Lieutenant, help is on the way.”

Sachs suddenly grabbed Sousuke's hand with surprising strength.

“Shut up... and listen... Sagara... the adjustment is... almost done, but... power unit... disconnected, so... Al can't move.”

“Lieutenant, please,” Sousuke moved his hand away, and listened to his explanation, continuing his first-aid procedure.

“The plug... on the right. It's broken, remove it... the locker, third cable... get it out, plug in... socket's here... then the APU will start... don't screw this up...”

This was extremely important - without explanation, Sousuke wouldn't be able to do anything. He wiped the blood coming from the biggest wound with some gauze. He could only get a glimpse of it, before blood poured out and covered it again. It looked like an artery near the heart might have been damaged. He couldn't do anything with the first-aid kit he had on his hands. He looked at the puddle of blood surrounding Sachs. Judging by its amount and his body weight, it was a miracle he could still talk.

He quickly set up an intravenous drip, but it was futile. Even if Dr. Goldbery somehow made it there in a couple of minutes, she would probably be too late already.

“The IME¹² cable is still attached. What do I do with it?”

“Just don't touch... leave it to Al...”

“What about the SAL¹³[17] tank? Do I need to set it to decompression?”

“Yes... careful... when disconnecting...”

Normally he should have been asking “where do you feel pain?” and other questions like that, but circumstances dictated the priority - the AS came first...

“What else... I've replaced the... motion management system... bus with one that has a... larger width. I... didn't wake Al up yet... don't know if he will... if there's a problem... remove the auxiliary line... from the control panel... you'd have to abandon the XL-3, but... you should still be able to move...”

“Got it. I will remember.”

It was as if the explanation had drained the last drops of life he had. Sachs suddenly stiffened, and the strength left his limbs.

“Sagara, I... don't blame anyone.”

¹² Integrated Motion Equaliser, an AS system.

¹³ Shock Absorber Liquid.



“Yes, you’re our bravest mechanic. Everyone knows that.
So hold on there. Goldbery is coming.”

“I... don’t want to have the grandma... performing mouth-to-mouth on me...”

“Tell her that yourself. She’ll...”

Sousuke stopped in mid-sentence. Sachs did not hear him anymore.

His eyes were looking at something very far away, and did not move.

“Damn it..!”

He knew it was useless, but he tried the defibrillator, and artificial respiration, again and again...

Goldbery came running out of a passageway. She must have been running the whole way there - her shoulders were heaving, she was out of breath. Sousuke looked up at her.

“He was a good man,” he said.

He bore the tragedy well, and did not dare cursing - only his usual frown became even more grave. He wiped Sachs’ blood from his hands and face, and sighed deeply.

“It’s time to prepare for our sortie...”

And following the late Sachs’ will, he began the start-up procedure of the Laevatein.



The ARX-8 Laevatein was waiting for him, fully equipped: AS-size buckshot, assault rifle, the gigantic demolition gun, two smaller Gatling guns in the back, the Lambda Driver cancellation device “fairy’s feather”, the disposable rapid deployment booster XL-3, twelve “Black Mamba” anti-aircraft missiles under the wings. Everything was in place.

From a distance, it looked like it was hurriedly put together, and the human-like silhouette was barely visible. *Can it even walk,*

with this pile of weapons on top of it? Sousuke felt even more the difference in strength and preparedness between them and the enemy.

He took the cable of the auxiliary power unit from the locker, and plugged it into a socket near the waist of the machine. The generator started working. It was time to restart the activation sequence from the external control panel.

“What... what were his last words?” Goldbery sounded like all strength had been drained from her voice.

“He said he didn’t want you performing mouth-to-mouth on him.”

“He’s terrible... really, incorrigible...”

Sousuke was continuing his work behind the back of the chief medical officer, who was smiling even though tears ran down her face.

He tried starting up A1. A long silence followed, then an indicator finally showed that the activation was a success, even though Sachs had doubts. It looked like the extension of the data bus had gone well. The voice interface was not connected yet, and the start-up data showed in text form on the screen of the maintenance terminal.

“> Connection confirmed...

...

> Status check in progress.

> Restarting APU.

...

...

> Commencing activation of vetronics systems.”

“He said he didn’t blame anyone.”

“Ah... well, me neither.”

“Not the Captain?”

“No, not if she said it was necessary. Absolutely necessary.”

Sousuke was silent.

“Have a little faith, Sousuke.”

He didn't answer, and continued working, disconnecting the IME and other cables as instructed, checking and removing that tank valve, finally locking down the access panel and the pieces of armor that were removed for maintenance. Lights ran down the machine as AI assumed control. Apparently, the rest was up to him.

With the low growl of the cooling unit, the Laevatein awakened.

He proceeded to strip off all the ribbons and labels with “REMOVE BEFORE LAUNCH” on them, before climbing onto the back of the unit's head to close a small weapons and equipment locker that was on the other side of the cockpit hatch. The locker wasn't that large - about the size of a camping rucksack - but enough to hold an old rocket launcher that Sousuke always kept with him. It was an M72 LAW one-shot unguided missile launcher, formerly used by the US Army. It was weaker than modern anti-tank weapons systems, but it did have one major advantage of being so compact as to fit in that locker (in the collapsed state, of course; one would extend the tube before shooting).

The palladium reactor's hum filled the hangar. Laevatein's prototype reactor was not designed to be nearly soundless, like most conventional models. He was just putting on the familiar headgear, when he noticed that Dr. Goldbery was packing her instruments and was going to leave the hangar.

“I'll be going. About Sachs...”

“I'll leave it to you.”

It was best that he wasn't the one to report it, Goldbery was a much more suitable person for that.

"All right. Take care, Sousuke."

"Roger that."

The screens inside the cockpit flickered to life. Again, that familiar cockpit, the familiar feeling of the M9 series master control suite. He put his arms though its fixations, grabbed the levers and stepped on the pedals, testing their responsiveness. Finally, with his left thumb he operated the cursor and began the final start-up procedure. The voice interface activated immediately.

"AI?"

<Yes, sergeant?> said the familiar low voice of the machine AI

"Establish datalink, get data about the ship from Dana."

<Roger. Accessing data circuit. Connection priority C. Connection established.>

Information about the vessel's current situation flowed onto one window in a side screen. The *de Danaan* was still in combat.

The vessel obviously wouldn't sink from one hit, but its two main characteristics - speed and low noise level - were now compromised, and they couldn't hope to deliver surprise attacks any more. It was the time for a direct confrontation of skill and firepower. On the other hand, they mostly got rid of the US Navy warships. The *Pasadena* seemed still willing to attack, but couldn't pursue them immediately. They had destroyed two of the Leviathan high speed submersibles. Another one was trying to avoid the self-propelled mines that Tessa had launched... sonar reported a distant explosion - one more down.

The remaining Leviathans, however, were coming in for an attack. They launched torpedoes, four of them. Tessa counter-attacked, launching three, and going into a dizzying evasive

maneuver, avoided two of them and got back into combat. Really, she was a monster.

<Sergeant, I've a question...>

“Hm?”

<Three o'clock, distance zero, unidentified target - body, human, male. What happened..?>

The screen showed part of the bloodied maintenance tunic.

“It's the body of Lieutenant Sachs.”

<Chief Maintenance Officer Edward Sachs was killed in action?>

“Affirmative.”

<Could I ask about the cause of death?>

“The ship was hit, and the external power supply unit fell onto him. He must have been so busy fixing you, he forgot to anchor it properly.”

A short silence followed, then Al said:

<Roger. Thank you for answering me.>

Meanwhile, the activation was proceeding smoothly. The test of the rapid deployment booster, attached to the back of the machine, finally began. Most of them checked out, however some errors were left. It was theoretically possible for the Laevatein to take flight using the XL-3, but they ran the tests again to make sure. That equipment, after all, was not official manufacture, but a system developed by Sachs, and tests only involved computer simulations, without any field trials whatsoever. They really had no way of knowing if the machine will fly or not, but Sachs' extraordinary efforts at least allowed them to connect the booster properly, which in itself was almost a miracle.

Errors again.

Continuing to rerun tests, he released the knee joint locks and guided the machine towards the main elevator.

Another impact. Another enemy torpedo exploding at close range. The damage was insignificant, but the functioning of the EMFC array seemed to be mostly disrupted. The *de Danaan*'s mobility suffered another hit.

Sousuke couldn't help with the naval battle. He could only stand by in the elevator, watch it, and continue to run tests on the XL-3. The aileron control linkages and auxiliary systems continued to remain unresponsive.

<Is it my fault?> said Al, while the test continued to run.

"This equipment was put together in a hurry, you can't avoid bugs."

<No, I meant Lieutenant Sachs.>

"What..?"

<Because he was trying to activate me as fast as possible, he forgot the safety measures.>

"Well..."

Sousuke was astounded. Al, feeling responsibility for the death of a person? Of course, his speech programs were very advanced, but he was still a machine. If it was something related to tactics and the current operation, it would be understandable, but there seemed to be no reason for that question.

"Why are you asking this? Worried about something?"

<No. The role of the maintenance personnel in the operation is almost over. Losing Lieutenant Sachs, as I am sure you know, does not affect our military strength.>

It was a mechanical answer - even too machine-like, perhaps, and Sousuke felt a slight flicker of irritation "just say that you feel it!". But before he could intervene, Al continued.

<However, I feel a much more significant loss. He had been taking care of me since I was in the "Arbalest". He, better than anybody else, knew the state of my "body". He never

inspected me, never talked to me. Not once. What I feel is on another level than tactical data.>

“Well, do you feel grief? Because of his death?”

<Simultaneously, I feel that the cause of his death might have been the low efficiency and hard maintenance of this body - that was the meaning of my original question, was it “my fault” or not.>

AI’s core unit was a quite unique device - made from liquid metal to imitate the human nervous system, something completely different from an ordinary M9 series machine AI. Sousuke, however, could not imagine that AI was such a perfect copy of a human being. He would understand if it was a small feeling of attachment, without any deep thought involved - like a person’s favorite gun, or car; but here were feelings of responsibility for the death of a person. One could say that this was already an imitation of emotions.

“It’s not your fault. He was doing what was necessary,” said Sousuke, trying not to give away his thoughts and suspicions. “Sachs said it himself ‘I don’t blame anyone.’”

<This is an extremely important piece of information to me, sergeant.>

“All right, all right. Let’s concentrate on the job.”

<Roger that.>

And AI fell silent, continuing to run checks on his equipment.

Sousuke suddenly remembered the letter from Sarah Miller, and the memory card she had sent with her letter. She had written that it was just some things she found on the Internet, so probably no crucial intelligence, and nothing concerning the Laevatein. There was probably no time to look through it now. He’ll do it later, when he returns. If he returns...

“Uruz 7! Are the preparations for sortie complete?” came the voice of the operations officer through the intercom.

The submarine vibrated as compressed air was pumped into the ballast tanks.

“Affirmative. On standby in elevator zero.”

“We are currently performing emergency surfacing. The flight deck will open as soon as we’re up, and once you get launched, we’re diving again. As planned, the cleaning up on the island’s left to you.”

“Roger.”

He checked the status of the machine. The control linkages that had been giving errors were still not operation. Sousuke gave up and stopped the tests - the auxiliary system seemed to be failing every time. That meant that he couldn’t do much but pray that the master system would not be damaged, and that the auxiliary one wouldn’t be needed.

The vessel’s nose was pointing upwards at a very steep angle - it flew out of the water like a rocket. Equipment, parts and other junk was flying around the hangar. Lieutenant Sachs’ body had been, fortunately, affixed to the deck by Lieutenant Goldbery, and did not move.

“Well, I’ll be going, ‘Bruiser’ Sachs...”

Sousuke switched the machine to manual control, and lightly shifted his right arm. The Laevatein’s right arm followed, and the machine, still kneeling, gave a final salute to the lost comrade. The elevator started going up at the same time.

We don’t need words to express how we feel - a single gesture is enough.

Right, LT..?

The elevator's warning light was blinking, the ear-splitting alarm siren was going off. The *de Danaan* had probably surfaced - the hull jolted one last time.

The elevator with the Laevatein was moving with speed well above regulations, but the machine effortlessly found its balance.

“Opening flight deck hatch! Uruz 7 - in the catapult, on the double!”

The Laevatein practically jumped out onto the flight deck. Overhead, the gigantic flight hatch was opening, and the sky came into view. It was a dark, purplish gray, and it looked like the sun had not yet risen. Heavy raindrops were being blown into the flight hatch by the winds of the sea. The wind was not that strong, but for him it would be the first time, launching in such conditions without preparation.

The *de Danaan* trembled under the assault of mighty waves. It was necessary to reduce the surfacing time as much as possible. Any submarine was at its weakest when surfaced. Sousuke did not want to lose a second, and quickly got the Laevatein fixed onto the catapult, in the posture of an Olympic sprinter at the start line.

<Connection established. XL-3 rocket engine on idle. Rotor blade extension to automatic mode. Flaps in take-off position.

<We are ready for take-off. Shall we request the TLS?¹⁴>

“Do it.”

<Requesting TLS.>

The operations officer replied immediately:

“Uruz 7, this is Control. Starting TLS sequence. See you on the beach!¹⁵”

¹⁴ I suppose it stands for Take-off Launch Signal.

¹⁵ Typical good-luck wish for landing operations.

The alarm buzzer went off, and the rocket motor kicked in at the same time as the catapult with a deafening howl. Sousuke felt extreme G-force of the acceleration, like a giant hand, almost crushing him in his seat. The end of the flight deck came up in the blink of an eye, the catapult released automatically. The machine was propelled from the deck, and looked like it was going to crash into a huge black wave, but then soared into the sky on wings of fire.

In the rear observation monitor, the *Tuatha de Danaan* could be seen closing its flight deck hatch, preparing to dive, but as they shot up straight through the rain-heavy clouds, it soon vanished out of sight.

As expected, the Laevatein was very unstable in flight. It was a wonder it could fly at all, but it could not keep on an even keel. Were they about to crash now? No, didn't look like it, at least for the time being. All on-screen indicators, constantly trembled, however as the machine accelerated, they showed signs of stabilizing. Even though the AS had wings, their movement was less of a proper "flight", and more of a "projection" along a trajectory. The powerful thrusters of the XL-3 were pushing the unstable craft, built for operations on land, towards Merida Island.

<Contact, appears to be a military vessel or similar vehicle, on our path. Distance three-one-seven, bearing 0-8-6.>

"A... vessel?!"

Sousuke had to shout over the awful noise.

<Unknown. Same type of contact at bearings 0-8-1 and 0-9-3.>

If they only had the sensor array of the Arbalest, or at least a regular M9, they could get more information. At that distance, a "military vessel or vehicle" was already a pretty good result. They

had to depend on the FLIR¹⁶, installed as part of the XL-3, and the onboard navigation system.



All on-screen indicators constantly trembled, however, as the machine accelerated, they showed signs of stabilizing. Even though the AS had wings, their movement was more of a "projection" along a trajectory than a proper "flight" anymore. The powerful thrusters of the XL-3 were pushing the aerodynamically unstable craft, built to be a "land weapon", towards Merida Island.

Three warships on their course... that was not natural. Those coastal waters were shallow, and an inexperienced crew would have been afraid to maneuver in them. So what was waiting for them there...

"These aren't warships. They're Behemoths!"

¹⁶ Forward Looking InfraRed - a thermal imaging device, usually part of a navigation system, on many ships and aircraft.

According to latest intelligence, exactly three of those gigantic AS remained.

<Detecting lock on, probably an anti-air missile... detecting launch, salvo of four, twelve in total. Shall we take evasive action?>

“No time for that!”

It was not easy to evade a modern anti-air missile, and besides, they weren’t exactly a fighter jet to begin with. With that craft, a poorly executed high-G turn meant that they would either stall, or their wings would come off, which would mean a crash in any case. They had no electronic warfare suite to speak of. The twelve missiles were approaching fast.

Thirty-five seconds to impact...



Around the time when the Laevatein was locked on by the Behemoths’ anti-air missile systems, alarms also went off in the C-17 that was transporting Mao and her team.

<Missile warning. Taking evasive action. Brace for impact.>

“Anti-ECS missiles? That’s quite a welcome” muttered Mao, who was sitting in the cockpit of her M9, on standby.

Their transport plane was equipped with the ECS, and a normal radar wouldn’t be able to pick it up. However, as soon as they arrived near the landing spot, they were greeted with that fireworks show. Still, even against anti-ECS missiles, at that height and speed, with their advanced electronic warfare systems, they would probably be able to avoid direct hits...

Impact, muffled roar of an explosion - that was a missile that ended up detonating in the vicinity of the plane. From her

cockpit, Mao couldn't see what was going on for herself, and could only pray for them to reach the drop zone safely.

“Did we get hit?!?”

“No... looks like it was just a fragment. Fire in engine two, shutting down engine, starting fire extinguishing system.”

One of the right-side engines was emitting a shrill, high-pitched whine. As the pilots shut down both right-hand-side engines, the sound gradually stopped, but the body of the aircraft started shaking violently. All of them - two ASes, thirty-two soldiers and crew, were flying on two engines. That was bad.

“It's all right, just drop us--...”

“No, hold on for a bit longer. Only fifteen klicks left. Think you can do it?” Clouseau interrupted her.

“Ben?!”

“If we drop now, we'll be too far from the target. One more mountain to climb over - we don't have the time for that.”

His argument was tactically sound. They could only wait, and trust the plane's crew.

“Right, copy that we'll... hold, somehow. You get ready to jump any time,” answered the pilot, and relayed the information to the two escorts. These were Mithril's last remaining FAV-8 “Super Harrier” attack aircraft that joined them over Pakistan's airspace. They had already been sweeping down to dangerously low altitudes to take down enemy SAM sites.

“This is Laguz 1, copy that,” acknowledged the pilot of one of the Harriers, “we'll provide escort as long as we can, try to make it to Point Echo--...”

The incoming missile alarm sounded again, interrupting him.

The transport plane made an impressive turn, launching a hologram decoy. An explosion, again - that time further away, but

small fragments rained down onto the fuselage. Bit by bit, the vibration was increasing, and one could bite their tongue if one wasn't careful.

A small fire broke out in the cargo bay. Yang and the rest of the soldiers preparing for a jump were shouting for an extinguisher, checking if there were no casualties.

Mao couldn't do anything. She only grabbed the joysticks a little harder, and started checking the status of the machine. No damage, all systems green, ready to go at any moment. Only ten clicks until the drop zone.

“Come on, hurry...”

Everybody was exceptionally tense - they were getting hit by the enemy, and couldn't do anything. To a soldier, that was stressful in the extreme. All of their training and acquired skills were useless, and they could crash at any moment.

“This is Laguz 2, destroyed two enemy SAM sites. I have visual on one more only--...”

A jarring noise interrupted his communication.

“This is Laguz 1, Laguz 2 is under fire. I can see smoke - Laguz 2, respond. Laguz 2? Can you hear me..?”

Six kilometers until the drop zone.

“Hurry! Please..!”

“Laguz 2 has crashed, coordinates twenty-one-eighty-two. Unable to confirm parachute release. Repeat, unable to confirm parachute...”

One of the Harriers had crashed, and it was unclear whether he had survived or not.

“All units, this is the pilot speaking. Engine one output is dropping. Unable to maintain altitude. I repeat, unable to maintain altitude.”

The fire in the cargo bay didn't stop, even though they had descended, and the cabin was decompressed. Three kilometers until the drop zone... it was already enough.

“Ben!!”

“Yes. Pilot, this will have to do, drop us.”

“Copy that, Uruz one. Good luck.”

The rear cargo hatch started opening. The pitch blackness outside and the roar of the wind created an unsettling resemblance to the maw of some legendary monster. It was at times colored in scarlet by the bursts of flak, and into this darkness the M9s would have to jump.

“Separating from rails! I'm going first!” yelled Clouseau through external speakers, disregarding all airdrop procedure and regulation.

The locks on the side of the M9 released. A warning buzzer sounded, and in a shower of sparks, Clouseau's “Falke” slid down the rails, and dropped outside head first.

“Uruz two, ready for drop!”

It was definitely not the time to follow proper procedure. Mao released the locks on her machine as soon as Clouseau disappeared overboard.

Tremendous impact - she felt her machine sliding into the back of the plane, then suddenly the left wall blocked her field of vision, and was just as suddenly replaced by the sky.

Between the starry sky and the pitch-black tar that was the earth, the C-17 was flying away, its right-hand engines ablaze, leaving a thin trail of smoke. Then, an explosion - she didn't know if it was a missile or flak, and her sensor couldn't pick up the aircraft. Mao's M9 was spun around by the shockwave. The transport plane was nowhere in sight, and where was the ground? Where was Clouseau? Did Yang and the others manage to jump

off safely? What about her own machine? What was the altitude again..? Everything, including the screens, was spinning around and shaking so badly that she couldn't read what was written on the indicators. Oh yes, the posture... she has to recover a proper flight posture.

She moved her hands and feet with all her strength, and the M9 adopted a proper posture, limbs spread out. Even so, the wind pressure was too much for the feedback systems, and the machine rolled from right to left. She brought in her right hand a little, and extended the other, which effectively stopped the irregular rotation.

She remembered that she had done this so many times. Her machine was finally in equilibrium, and she was one and a half thousand meters above ground. It was still too early to open the parachute. She checked indicators, and activated ECS, then set her sensors to passive infra-red. Below her stretched a frozen mountain ridge, but she discovered a heat source - it was a flak installation, that was still shooting at her. Now...

She swung her limbs and the machine abruptly turned over several times, sliding to the left. Shells passed the spot where she was a second before, and their proximity fuse made them detonate too close for comfort. Thanks to the ECS, the enemy's aim was quite inaccurate.

The machine was still unsteady, but she pulled out her assault rifle and fired, her weapons control system compensating for the unsteady movement and the weapon recoil. The 40mm shells from the AS-type assault rifle rained down upon the enemy position below, and exploded.

The altitude was five hundred meters - she couldn't go any lower. The primary parachute opened and significantly reduced her drop velocity. It soon reached its limit of usefulness, and she cut it

off, opening the secondary parachute. Her speed dropped again - if enemies remained in the area, now was her weakest moment.

The parachute detached, she was in free fall for the last few meters, the ground was drawing near... and she landed. The M9's joints were saved by the reaction of the shock absorber liquid, that turned into steam from the impact and gushed out of the joints. The metal frame screamed under the impact, and Mao saw sparks in her eyes as she was thrown forward in the cockpit. That happened every time.

Gritting her teeth, she immediately started getting away from the landing spot, scanning her surroundings for any signs of Clouseau or the other soldiers, but she could not find them. If they were fine, they had to be somewhere close. No enemy units were in sight, either... no, speaking about targets, she could see one.

After the gentle slope where Mao had landed, there was a low mountain ridge; beyond it was a deep and wide canyon, and just behind it, a huge mountain rose into the clouds. It was black, and looked monstrous from the distance. That was Ishkashim - the whole mountain was the target. They had to climb up to the base entrance, then assault the underground fortress itself, getting to the control room and stopping the launch.

“Fifty minutes left... only fifty minutes...”

Mao laughed dryly. No, it was far from genuine laughter, and closer to a spasmodic cough. The clock in a corner of the screen continued ticking away the seconds.



Six missiles from the Behemoths were closing in. The Laevatein, not being able to counter them in a proper way - such as by taking evasive action or using the electronic warfare suite - was

pushing on in the grey morning sky. They had no choice but to go through them... Sousuke finally made his decision:

“Ready ‘Zeroes’, both sides.”

<Roger. Weapon C, weapon D, ready to fire.>

The two 20mm Gatling guns, that they called “Zeroes”, mounted in the lower back of the Laevatein, swung around and locked in a forward-facing position. They were optional weapons for the M9 series, and while their firepower was relatively weak, they had the advantage of a very high rate of fire, spitting out up to a hundred rounds per second.

“Ready GEC-B, Boxer 2, GAU-19. I want them all prepared to fire.”

One 76mm Boxer shotgun in each hand, one GEC-B 40mm assault rifle in each sub-arm, and two GAU-19 12.7mm Gatling guns in the head of the machine. He was going to intercept the incoming missiles with all eight guns. And if something got through, he would have no choice but to try and withstand the impact with the help of the Lambda Driver.

“You take care of the Zeroes and the GEC, I’ll handle the others.”

<Roger.>

“Don’t be too cautious about ammo. At my signal, fire all at once.”

<Copy.>

Setting an AS to intercept posture in high-speed flight was not simply a matter of moving the hands a little. From the turbulence, the craft became very unsteady. The flight computer of the XL-3 was loaded to maximum, trying to stabilize the machine using its control surfaces, but they somehow managed to adopt a proper posture.

The missiles were coming - he could already spot them with some difficulty on the FLIR. Moments remained until impact - they were at four thousand... three thousand... two...

“Fire!!”

Eight guns opened fire simultaneously. In three seconds, they shot around twelve hundred bullets towards the targets, and because of the recoil alone the speed dropped significantly, it was just on the verge of stalling. However, the powerful boosters of the XL-3 kept propelling it forward.

The missiles went straight into the hail of bullets. One was hit - from which weapon he couldn't be sure - spun around and broke into fragments. Another one fell to pieces quite a ways ahead. One more was shot down, and then four others detonated somewhere in the vicinity. There was no avoiding the ones that were left.

<Five missiles approaching. Impact in two...one...>

Focus... visualize it...

The space in front of the machine warped.

The machine raised its right hand forward, as if holding the force field, and five missiles exploded in the same instant. The Lambda Driver was fortunately able to protect the Laevatein from the shower of fragments. Anti-air missiles had a relatively weak charge, thus he was able to defend himself, but if they were just a little stronger, he would now be a burning wreck, plummeting down into the sea.

“Damage report!”

<Damage to left wing of XL-3. First aileron unresponsive. Slats actuator unresponsive.¹⁷>

¹⁷ Control surfaces on the leading edge of the wing, as opposed to flaps, which are on the trailing edge. See for ex.:

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2b/Wing.slat.600pix.jpg>

“The main body?”

<No damage. Lambda Driver fully operational.>

The AS was an extension of the pilot's body. He could create a powerful image in his mind to protect the body of the machine itself, but the wings were left out, leaving him unable to protect the XL-3 with his force field.

Damage to the left wing... he turned the machine's head to inspect it visually.

Of the wing's four sections, everything from three, damaged in the attack, was gone. A bad vibration started to shake the machine. The machine would have rolled over to the left, if it wasn't for the flight computer, patiently compensating every second. And the Laevatein continued its flight. This rapid deployment booster, no matter how quickly it was put together, was just as tough as its parent, “Bruiser” Sachs.

“It won't survive another attack, though...”

He changed the machine's posture, and stowed all weapons, including the Boxers in his hands. Extending them forward, he ordered:

“Ready the Demolition Gun. Switch to Gun-Howitzer mode!”

<Sergeant... are you joking?>

It was obvious that he didn't believe what he heard, and asked again. The Demolition Gun, after all, was their main weapon - practically an artillery cannon, that could destroy a Behemoth in one shot. However, even on the ground, with the AS bracing itself, the recoil was extraordinary. Shooting that while in the air...

<Sergeant, the machine will fall apart.>

“Don't worry about the recoil, just hurry!”

<Roger.>

He had also probably recognized that in this worsening situation, attack was the best defense, and did not object to his orders again.

The cannon, stowed below the XL-3's wings, began shifting to its firing position with the assistance of a mechanical arm. Sousuke finally caught its grip in his right hand, and locked it in front of his chest, switching targeting systems to long-range Gun-Howitzer mode. The black barrel swayed a little, and pointed in the direction of the target. The machine was still in flight posture, and the vibration increased even more.

This would normally be the last thing an AS pilot would do in flight, with a damaged wing, but they had no choice. The flight computer was not able to handle this on its own, and got assistance from Al - they had to adjust the trim around thirty times per second. Raising the engine output to maximum, they somehow managed to keep the machine in the air.

He set the infrared sensors at maximum range. The nearest Behemoth was approximately eighteen kilometers away, barely in range of the targeting system. As they got closer, he set the targeting reticule on it, and could already distinguish its shape.

“Damn..!”

The enemy was preparing for attack. Its gigantic main gun, not too different from the main caliber on a battleship, was pointing his way. Perhaps they realized that anti-aircraft missiles were not strong enough. Surely, they wouldn't be able to snipe him as deftly as Kurz.

He looked at the data from the ballistic targeting system, and adjusted the gun, based on his intuition.

“I'm going to fire!”

Focus...visualize...

How will the cannon move in his hands? How strong will it be affected by the wind? He remembered that he shot it many times before, and knew all of its peculiarities. He pressed the trigger.

A fireball exploded before his eyes, and the machine creaked from the recoil. The gun barrel swayed, the machine dropped a little, but that was it - it was still flying.

<It seems that the shooting was successful. You seem to be at ease with using the Lambda Driver in flight.>

“Yes, yes, just observe the impact!”

<On it.>

The shell from the Demolition Gun was flying towards the target Behemoth, fifteen clicks away, at Mach 3, and would take around fifteen seconds to get there. Only several seconds left... and impact, on the sea several hundred meters behind the Behemoth.

<Correcting targeting system. Loading cannon.>

“Right...”

The cannon fired, and he was able to hold back the recoil once again. As soon as the 165mm shell left the barrel, he saw that the enemy fired, too, and a 300mm shell was coming his way.

<Should we take evasive--...>

“I don’t think we can, pray that it misses!”

A lump of destructive force was coming at him from that black sea. On the screen, his own shell had almost reached the target...

Both impacted in almost the same instant. Sousuke thought he saw a shadow cross the optical sensor’s field of vision, then a shockwave came from behind and shook the machine. The anti-aircraft shell exploded quite far behind him, but it was still a close shave.

The shot he fired, however, hit its target. The Behemoth's chest exploded spectacularly, and it started to slowly bend backwards. It seemed to raise one hand towards the starry sky, dropping its cannon, and then collapsed into the sea.

<Hit on target. Behemoth B - confirmed destroyed.>

“Maintain engine output at maximum. We’re going to get through this breach in their defenses.”

Merida Island was already in sight. The two remaining Behemoths to the left and right started to move and were preparing their anti-air artillery. At that speed and range, he would be able to make it through somehow, and even though his altitude was unstable, the booster’s output remained at optimal levels.

The radar detected helicopters in the skies above Merida, and with the help of the FLIR marked the objectives.

<Contacts, six attack helicopters. Mi-28 Havocs.>

They were moving towards the shore, most likely preparing to strike as soon as he landed. As if he’d let them.

“‘Black Mambas’, let’s use all of them.”

<Ready.>

The twelve heat-seeking missiles under the wings of the XL-3 were all locked on, and the target boxes on the screen became red, with familiar words “VALID LOCK” appearing beside them.

“Fire!”

<Roger.>

The twelve missiles were launched in one salvo, their rocket engine ignitions making for a spectacular fireworks display. Leaving behind flaming tails, they headed for their targets at incredible speed. The enemy probably didn’t expect any anti-aircraft capability from the Laevatein. The helicopters scattered,

ejecting flares, but it was too late. It was two missiles per helicopter, and they hit.

Explosions lit up the sky above Merida, and were it not in the middle of the battle, he would stop to admire the magnificent view. All the helicopters were crashing or falling apart in the air.

<All targets confirmed destroyed.>

The flak from Merida added to the intensity of the anti-aircraft fire, supported by the Behemoths. He was practically caught in crossfire. Thick curtains of tracer bullets were very close to the Laevatein. Even with the Lambda Driver he wouldn't be able to withstand that amount of firepower.

He felt a kick - a shell must have struck the machine. Upon checking, it looked like it went through the engine cowling of the right booster, which caught fire. The vibration intensified, and the engines were emitting a strange whine. There was a danger of explosion in mid-air. The sound of the alarm mixed with Al's repeated warnings into a cacophony of noise.

Only three thousand meters to Merida, and if he cut off the booster now, he would fall into the sea. If he deployed the emergency balloons to slow down the descent, he'd be turned into Swiss cheese by the Behemoths and other flak.

Only two thousand meters until landing. The right engine and wing were ablaze, and flames were licking the second engine.

One thousand meters. Shot again, - a large hole appeared, as if by magic, in the right wing. The machine was losing too much altitude and speed. The fire had now spread so much that the Laevatein's right shoulder was black.

Eight hundred meters. He couldn't wait any longer...

“Cut us loose!”

There was no time for argument - Al immediately released the lock bolts, and the XL-3 came loose. The machine began its

freefall, and the booster soared up into the sky, spiraling wildly, then exploded high above.

He waited until the last second to open the primary parachute. Sudden deceleration - the parachute cut off, and he opened the secondary one. Without waiting for it to slow him down much, he cut it loose, and was in freefall for the last hundred meters.

It was a sandy beach on the west coast of the island. The very same beach, in fact, where he had been explaining the basics of handling of an M9 to Tessa, what seems like centuries ago.

With an incredible splash, the machine landed two hundred meters off the wide, shallow beach, on the water, though for the AS it was not a problem, as the water level only came up to its calf.

He immediately dropped the machine into a crouching posture and pointed the Demolition Gun towards the northwest, where the shape of one of the Behemoths was visible, only six klicks away. It had already confirmed his position, and was slowly turning towards him, ready to pound the beach with all of its artillery.

“Too slow!”

He aimed and fired. The recoil was very powerful, but he didn't fall over. The shell hit the Behemoth in the shoulder. The giant staggered, and pieces of armor fell off it. He loaded the cannon again, aimed, and fired, managing to deal with the recoil. This shot hit it in the head. Second Behemoth down. It wasn't that easy hitting them at that distance, even with their monstrous size.

<Gun target lock detected, from Behemoth C... weapon discharge.>

The last Behemoth shot at them from the southwest, and it was not just the main gun - it looked like the pilot decided to open fire from all guns at once. Sousuke made the machine jump several

times, avoiding its fire, and landed on a rocky slope near the beach, which turned out to be full of anti-AS landmines. He had practiced there so many times that from that rocky slope, he could move around the island with his eyes closed.

Shells of all kinds were ploughing the beach around the place where he had landed moments ago.

“What, you think I don’t know my own back yard..?”

He loaded the Demolition Gun again. Feeling as if he was protecting his old home, he turned it towards the last Behemoth. It took him three shots to bring it down, after which he turned the machine, and disappeared into the jungle.

“Going to Phase two. Sensors to passive, GPL on idle. Scattering ‘seeds.’”

<Roger.>

On the lower back of the AS, the small hatch of the grenade dispenser popped open, a small drum-like decoy rolled on the ground. After this he proceeded South at high speed. He carried eight of these decoy units, that not only emitted the same signal wave as the Laevatein, but also waves in the infra-red spectrum. It couldn’t, of course, recreate the shape and movement of the machine, but it was enough to fool some enemies’ eyes. The decoys were also equipped with vibration sensors and could pick up the enemy’s footsteps. If he used the forest to hide, this reduced, to a certain extent, the risk of the enemy finding him. This, however, was not all. To reveal their presence, the decoys actively “communicated” with each other, sending bursts of encrypted data. Of course, one machine leading this lively exchange of information seemed very fishy; and if this communication, normally restricted during operations, played over and over for a period of time, the enemy would think it suspicious.

And then there were Kalinin and Leonard. If he made mistakes, they would simply outsmart him and drive him into a corner. Then...

“Al, remove encryption on circuit E2. Switch all communications, decoys included, to emergency frequencies.”

<Are we going to reveal to the enemy the contents of our communications..?>

“Let them hear it. This machine is a radio station, and I’m the DJ.”

Many questions and doubts swirled in his head long before the sortie. How to contact Kaname? How to counter the enemies on Merida? Are his plans correct? What does she want, and what does he want for himself?

Somehow, when the battle started, most of them became clear as day. Especially, the question that he had been asked many times before: who is he, really? He couldn’t give a proper reply to Leonard’s speech, nor to Sarah’s letter, nor to a lot of other people that talked to him about many different things. The reason for that was that that he wasn’t a pastor, a politician, a mental health counselor, or a teacher. So, in the end, who was he?

Why, that’s obvious. Now, in the heat of battle, I feel my true self. I am a soldier.

To Be Continued in Part 2...



(Originally B&W with texts all over it, so I put the color version instead)



(This is a cleaner version of the alternate cover for volume 3. It was included as an extra at the end of this volume)

